

4-1997

The Emergence of an Icon: The Frida Kahlo Cult

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THESIS APPROVAL

The abstract and thesis of Teresa Neva Tate for the Master of Arts degree in History were presented April 9, 1997, and accepted by the thesis committee and the department.

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ABSTRACT

An abstract of the thesis of Teresa Neva Tate for the Master of Arts in History presented April 9, 1997.

Title: The Emergence of an Icon: The Frida Kahlo Cult.

At her death in 1954, Frida Kahlo was known as little more than the wife of muralist Diego Rivera. Since then her art and personae have taken on a cult-like following and she has become an icon of popular culture. Thus far Frida's reputation has stretched across three decades, from the 1970s, 1980s, and into the 1990s. Frida's popularity is viewed as primarily emerging from the Women's Movement of the 1970s. However, interest from many other groups have carried her image into the 1980s and 1990s. Aside from the Women's Movement, Frida's popularity reflects a growing interest in Mexico, specifically the "romanticized" image of Mexico, in the wake of rising international relations between Mexico and the United States.

Each subsequent exhibit of Frida's work brought with it a plethora of articles and exhibition catalogues. By the late 1980s books on Frida's biography and her paintings began flooding the market along with articles

from various periodicals, from fashion, to medical, to women's studies journals. Numerous other publications on Frida have included calendars, postcards, and a cookbook. A book of Frida's letters and her diary were published in 1995.

The associations around Frida's name have created the legend of her personality. She is viewed as a genius painter, one who expressed her emotions and life on canvas, who spoke from her heart and who has become remembered as a martyred saint. Scholars and the general public alike have latched onto Frida's image, making her into more than a mere artist, rather into a remarkably insightful and brave individual. This popular myth has been supported by Frida's own lifestyle, by her flamboyant attire, scandalous relationships, and internationally recognized friendships.

Frida was, however, an individual who suffered from the same insecurities that much of the population does: insecure in love and acceptance. Frida had the ability to mask her emotions of insecurity with her physical pain, which she then exercised on the canvas. It is this ability to deal with her emotional pain that has brought her life and work to the cult-like status that her memory now enjoys.

THE EMERGENCE OF AN ICON: THE FRIDA KAHLO CULT

by

TERESA NEVA TATE

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS
in
HISTORY

Portland State University
1997

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

There are many people who have advised, assisted and encouraged me in the production of this thesis. I would like to thank my advisor, Dr. Friedrich Schuler, who directed, encouraged, and pushed me. Also my thesis committee members – David Horowitz, Shawn Smallman, and Martha Works – for their time, patience, and counsel.

I would also like to thank my friends and family members who encouraged me along the way and who read countless drafts. A special thanks to Sandra Ann Tate and Sèonaid Ophelia Janet Valiant. I also thank Mark Trowbridge who first encouraged me to continue my education.

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INTRODUCTION

During her lifetime Frida Kahlo was well known in Mexico. However, it was not until the 1970s that she was “discovered” or “re-discovered” outside the country of her birth. Regardless of the fact that Frida Kahlo participated in over thirty exhibits in Mexico, the United States, Sweden, France, England, and Peru, between 1937 and 1954¹ and was well received in all her exhibits, it was the exhibitions after her death in the United States and Europe that sparked an interest and produced an almost cult like following, especially among artists.

This study seeks to show how events come together to form a cultural icon. It also develops an understanding of the rise in popularity of Frida Kahlo and the subsequent cult following. While many of the recent authors

¹ Lowe, Sarah M. *Frida Kahlo*. Hong Kong: University Publishing, 1991: 25.

writing on Frida have discussed at length her artwork and traumatic life story, few have even attempted to explain the elevation of her popularity. In all the books and articles written about Frida the authors have primarily focused on her life but not the following gained after her death. Hayden Herrera, whose biography of Frida helped bring fame to the artist, makes a statement as to the possible reasoning behind the rise of her popularity: “a Hispanic woman, bisexual, an invalid and an artist - all the qualifications for a cult figure.”² Others see her as the perfect romantic heroine, as author Martha Zamora stated: “one who suffered greatly, died young, and spoke directly through her art to our atavistic fears of sterility and death.”³

In her dissertation abstract, 1981, Hayden Herrera states that Frida Kahlo had already become something of a cult figure in Mexico by 1980. Although Frida was not as well known in the United States by the early nineteen-eighties, Herrera points to there existing a growing interest, both academic and popular, in her work.⁴ Ever since the 1968 Tlatelolco massacre, which scarred the Mexican nation and destroyed its popular revolutionary ideology, Mexican artists have sought alternative beliefs and icons to replace those shattered. More importantly, according to author Liza

² Herrera, Hayden. “Why Frida Kahlo Speaks to the 90s” *New York Times*. October 28, 1990.

³ Zamora, Martha. *Frida Kahlo: The Brush of Anguish*. Translated by Marilyn Sode Smith. San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 1990: 8.

Bakewell, Mexican artists have looked to Frida Kahlo to represent a post-1968 awareness.⁵

The commercialization of Frida as a cultural image originated with the propaganda built up around Mexican art in two specific instances; the 1968 Olympics and the 1975 International Women's Conference both held in Mexico City. The Organizing Committee of the XIX Olympiad published a catalogue of the Frida Kahlo Museum⁶ with the intent of gaining tourists with the capital city's artistic and cultural heritage as well as arousing the attention of the Mexican people.⁷ The Women's Conference further stimulated interest in Mexican art through various exhibits of Mexican women artists.

Even prior to the 1975 Women's Conference, feminists in the United States had begun the initial stages of forming an attachment to Frida Kahlo. This is documented in an article by Gloria Orenstein published in 1973, in which Orenstein cites the Frida Kahlo Museum catalogue⁸ as a source for

⁴ Herrera, Hayden. *Frida Kahlo: Her Life, Her Art*. Ph.D. dissertation. New York: City University of New York, 1981.

⁵ Bakewell, Liza. "Frida Kahlo: A Contemporary Feminist Reading" *Frontiers*. V13n3, 1993: 166.

⁶ *The Frida Kahlo Museum*. introduction by Lola Olmeda de Olvera. Mexico City: Organizing Committee of the XIX Olympiad, 1968.

⁷ *Ibid.*: n.p.

⁸ Orenstein cites: O'Gorman, Juan. "Frida Kahlo" also Rivera, Diego. "Frida Kahlo and Mexican Art." *Catalogue of the Frida Kahlo Museum*. Editions Miguel Galas S.A. Mexico, 1970.

her information regarding the artist. Frida's traumatic life story thus became of interest and an inspiration to feminist and women artists alike.

In her article, Gloria Orenstein states that the discovery of Frida Kahlo had begun by the general art populace.⁹ Orenstein made a passionate plea for recognition of Frida and her work when she stated: "her fame is legendary, but her artistic reputation is not commensurate with her stature and her importance."¹⁰ Although the Frida Kahlo Museum was dedicated on July 25, 1958, she had been 'written out of Art History.' Orenstein's plea came at a time when feminist writers were beginning to document women artists and write them into the history of art. Frida was brought to the academic world through events such as Joyce Kozloff who spoke about Frida's work at a meeting of the College Art Association in January 1975.¹¹ Moreover, in an article in the journal *Art in America*, Janis Bergman-Carlton referred to Herrera's biography entitled *Frida: A Biography of Frida Kahlo*, as having brought Frida to her present-day state of prominence.¹²

In the midst of US-Mexican relations over oil, Mexican art began seeping its way into American galleries. This reflected the image of Mexico as exotic and romantic, an image portrayed by businessmen in both the United States and Mexico. The Mexico Today Symposium (1978-79) used

⁹ Orenstein, Gloria. "Frida Kahlo: Painting for Miracles" *Feminist Art Journal*. 1973.

¹⁰ Ibid.: 9.

¹¹ Herrera, Hayden. "Frida Kahlo: Her Life, Her Art" *Artforum*. V14n9, May 1976:44.

art exhibits as a cultural image.¹³ Although Frida was not coined as a poster-girl at this point her art began being displayed in galleries.¹⁴ In fact it was at this time that Frida had her first solo exhibit in the United States since 1938. The Women's Movement and Mexican-Americans helped bring Frida to the attention of galleries and businessmen who eventually saw in her a commodity well worth investing in. Through exhibits such as the Museum of Contemporary Art in Chicago and representation through Christie's Auction House,¹⁵ Frida's work has become more well-known than that of her husband the renown muralist Diego Rivera.

The Chicago exhibit toured six museums¹⁶ and inspired numerous other exhibits of Frida's work. In San Francisco the Galeria de la Raza

¹² Bergman-Carton, Janis. "Like an Artist" *Art in America*. V181n1, Jan. 1993: 36.

¹³ "Treasures of Mexico" exhibit.

¹⁴ Melnychuk, Sue. *Confirming claims and investigating identities: Frida Kahlo and American feminism in the late 1970s*. MA Thesis. Canada: University of British Columbia, 1992: 10-11.

¹⁵ May 1979, Sothbey's sold *Self-portrait with Monkey* for \$44,000. Madonna now owns the painting, and paid \$1 million for it. May 1991, Christie's sold *Self-portrait with Loose Hair* for \$1.65 million. Another self portrait was privately sold for \$3.3 million. See: Tully, Judd. "The Kahlo Cult" *ARTnews*. V93n4, April 1994: 126-33.; Long, Mary. "Back to ducks" *Economist*. Vol.36, August 5, 1995: 78.; Vinzant, Carol. "IBM's American paintings fetch record sale prices" *Reuters*. May 25, 1995.; "Christie's sells painting by Kahlo for \$1.65 million" *Wall Street Journal*. C, 8:4, May 16, 1991.; Rubiano, Dora. "Venden cuadro de Frida Kahlo en \$3.2 millones: records mundiales en" *El Diario/La Prensa*. May 5, 1995.; Rubiano, Dora. "Sotheby's rematará la "colección IBM": Gran subasta de arte" *El Diario/La Prensa*. March 28, 1995.

¹⁶ Originating in Chicago at the Museum of Contemporary Art in January of 1978, the exhibit traveled to: Mandeville Art Gallery, University of California, San Diego (through May 17); Phoenix Art Museum, Arizona (June 9-July 23); University of Texas Art Museum at Austin (August 13-October 1); Sarah Campbell Blaffer Gallery, University of Houston (October 14-November 19); Neuberger Museum, State

exhibited works by Mexican-American artists with Frida being represented as an icon for the Day of the Dead celebrations.¹⁷ Although this representation appeared innovative in the United States, artists in Mexico had long been identifying Frida with the Day of the Dead. For example, an artist in Tijuana created “Sta. Frida, the patron saint of children and of undocumented women and undocumented art exhibitions.”¹⁸

Frida’s rise to popularity in the United States sparked an interest in her work in Europe. This was first demonstrated through a retrospective exhibit at the Whitechapel Art Gallery in London in 1982. This exhibit traveled through Europe and ended in New York. Additionally, it provided Europe with the first exposure of Frida Kahlo since her exhibit in Paris in 1939.¹⁹

The 1980s also saw Frida’s image taken up by the film industry. Singer Madonna, who owns two paintings by Frida,²⁰ wanted to star as the artist in a movie, which never materialized.²¹ In 1984, Mexico issued a

University of New York at Purchase (December 8-January 4, 1979). For further information see: Herrera, Hayden. *Frida Kahlo*. Chicago: The Museum of Contemporary Art, 1978.; Chaplik, Dorothy. "The Haunting Vision of Frida Kahlo" *Nuestro*. May 1978: 64.; Muchnie, Suzanne. "Two exhibits with something special" *Los Angeles Times*. Part VI, April 17, 1978:4.

¹⁷ Kamin, Ira. "Memories of Frida Kahlo" *San Francisco Sunday Examiner and Chronicle*. May 6, 1979: 44-50.

¹⁸ Lowe:10.

¹⁹ Tully: 126-33.; also see: Mulvery, Laura. and Peter Wollen. *Frida Kahlo and Tina Modotti*. London: Whitechapel Art Gallery, 1982.

²⁰ Madonna owns *Self-portrait with Monkeys* and *My Birth*.

²¹ Tully: 126-33.

patrimony on Frida's work, thus ensuring that no more of her works could be sold outside Mexico.²²

In 1990, Hayden Herrera, examined the cult which had arisen around Frida. Her article entitled "Why Frida Kahlo Speaks to the 90s" corresponded with the opening of the art exhibition "Mexico: Splendors of Thirty Centuries"²³ at the Metropolitan Museum. This exhibit coincided with the economic summit where US President Bush and Mexican President Salinas were scheduled to discuss a free-trade pact between their countries. Although the exhibit largely focused on pre-Columbian art, Frida essentially became the "poster-girl." Her self-portraits were mass produced in the forms of buttons, posters, and billboards advertising the exhibition.²⁴ Thus, in conjunction with the economic summit, Frida's face became the face of the new financial reappraisal which would generate a comparable enhancement of the stature and investment portfolio of Mexico itself.

²² Ibid: 129.; Also see: Herrera, Hayden. "Why Frida Kahlo Speaks to the 90s" *New York Times*. October 28: 1990.

²³ Hughes, Robert. "Onward from Olmec" *Time*. October 1990: 80.; Tewlow, Jeff. "Splendors of Mexico" *Hispanic*. January 1, 1991: 28.; Goldman, Shifra M. "Metropolitan Splendors: The Buying and Selling of Mexico" *Third Text*. n14, Spring 1991: 17-25.; Barta, Roger. "Mexico Oficio: The Miseries and Splendors of Culture" translated by Coco Fusco. *Third Text*. n14, Spring 1991: 7-15.

²⁴ Frida's image became so popular at this time period that it even appeared in TV shows. For example: Seinfeld. "Cigar Store Indian" 8917. Every bus/metro stop had the same poster of Frida.

The results of this study will focus mainly on the United States and will show the events leading up to the emergence of Frida Kahlo as a cultural icon. For almost two decades, Frida's self-portraits have provided numerous critics and artists with models to challenge and redefine prevailing gender stereotypes as well as give visual voice to the emerging expressions of gender, racial, and ethnic divergence. Her cult has, of course, also sparked an angry current of anti-Friditas, especially in Mexico, according to author Judd Tully. The feminist art critic, Lucy Lippard, points out the downside to the Frida Kahlo cult, one in which Frida is perceived as a victim.²⁵ Lippard's view is one that Frida has become idealized by many segments of the population, which is, however, precisely the terms under which one becomes an icon.

In order to understand Frida's rise to fame it is necessary to first grasp a knowledge of the experiences she lived through. Thus the first chapter discusses the life of Frida Kahlo, the 'real Frida.'

With the numerous medical procedures she endured it is only logical to then examine the attraction her life has received from those in the medical and psychological professions. From this chapter a study of Frida's ability to survive under extreme conditions, even ones she herself created, will lead into the following chapter that deals with the Performing Arts and the

²⁵ Tully: 126-133.

representation of her tragic life. Frida's ailments and invalidism has been exaggerated in many theatrical productions that focus on her life story. These examples have lead to a worship of her suffering.

Artists have also formed an attachment to Frida. Theirs is one of like profession. As an artist herself, Frida painted her pain into her canvases. Artists have, likewise, taken on this example and look to her as a representative for their art or even as a saint.

The fashion industry has idealized her clothing styles, that of the Tehuantepec women. Frida's look has become synonymous with pain and seduction as models, dressed in Frida style clothing, peer out at the viewers.

Members of the homosexual community have gained interest in Frida due to her open bisexual relationships. She never concealed her sexuality. This has gained the attention of those in the sexual revolution, such as singer Madonna.

The feminist movement has long been thought of as being responsible for Frida's fame. Feminist writers of the 1970s were concerned with writing female artists into art history. Frida was seen as an example for female artists. She painted in a male dominated country and painted explicitly female subject matter.

International relations between the United States and Mexico have also boosted Frida's popularity. By 1990 her face began the transformation to becoming a representative for Mexico itself. In all the groups interested in Frida it has been her extraordinary pain combined with the mythical idea of exoticism that has let her image prevail and allowed it to continue to grow.

THE REAL FRIDA

Sugar skulls, wax doves, candelabra, books and a Communist flag accompany the memorabilia of one of Mexico's most adored artists, Frida Kahlo. Beloved by many, her death in 1954, has been remembered by articles that celebrate her life and reflect upon the anniversary of her death at the age of forty-seven. In honor of her death, permission was granted for her coffin to lie in state at the Palace of Fine Arts in Mexico City.²⁶ Cherished as a national idol, she is referred to simply as Frida.

A red flag with the communist hammer and sickle lay across Frida's coffin. Once opened, the coffin revealed Frida amidst a field of red carnations. Hundreds gathered to watch and take part in the funeral procession that lead her body to the crematorium. Many followed as far as

²⁶ Drucker, Malka. *Frida Kahlo: torment and triumph in her life and art*. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1995: 143.

possible, only turning back once nearing the oven.²⁷ In the numerous reflections written on this moment, the muralist David Alfaro Siqueiros recalls Frida's body rising up as though sitting just before she entered the oven's immense heat. Her hair ablaze, surrounding her smiling face, it gave the appearance as though she were looking through a giant sunflower.²⁸

Born on July 6, 1907, she was baptized Magdalena Carmen Frida Kahlo y Calderón.²⁹ Later in life Frida referred to the date of her birth as 1910, in order to identify with the revolution and 'rebirth' of her country. Her heritage was a mixture of European and Mexican. Her parents were Guillermo Kahlo, a Hungarian Jew who moved to Mexico as an adult, and Matilde Calderón of Spanish-Indian descent. Frida was born into a Mexico ripped apart by a revolution that changed the country's social outlook. Intellectuals began looking back to their heritage as artists began to imitate primitive styles. Together they formed a new sense of nationalism. Departing from the European influences, inspired by the dictator Porfirio Díaz and his

²⁷ Ibid.: 144-45.; Herrera, Hayden. *Frida: A Biography of Frida Kahlo*. New York: Harper and Row, Publishers, 1983:438.; Kahlo was a beloved personality in Mexico, many people attended her funeral, including former President Lázaro Cárdenas, who was also a pallbearer. Also see: Kamin: 44-50.

²⁸ Siqueiros was referring to a painting Frida had destroyed. One in which she had painted her face in a sunflower. See Drucker: 144-5.

²⁹ Kahlo went by her second middle name in honoring her father's heritage. On her birth certificate her name has the German spelling of Frieda, however, after the beginning of World War II she dropped the 'e' in an attempt to disassociate herself with her German name. See: Herrera. *Frida*.: 10.; Drucker: 7.

elitist followers, the new Mexico reflected upon its native roots and launched an agenda of cultural renewal and educational growth. Mexico's archaeological history was being revealed in excavations of the ancient ruins at Mitla, Monte Alban, El Tajin, and Teotihuacan. A new fascination was found in the native arts and crafts of all regions.³⁰

Frida Kahlo's early life seemed similar to that of other children her age. She suffered from the same diseases many children do: measles, chicken pox, and tonsillitis. However, in 1913, at the age of six Frida suffered from a bout with polio. Her treatment consisted of being confined to her room for nine months. Her right leg was washed with "walnut water and small hot towels."³¹ These nine months were to be followed with exercise to strengthen the leg. This experience left Frida physically and emotionally wounded and often lonely. To amuse herself she invented an imaginary friend. By breathing on the window in her room she created a small patch of fog big enough for her to draw an imaginary door. In her imagination Frida passed through this door and played with her imaginary

³⁰ Zamora: 19.; Smith, Bradley. *Mexico: A History in Art*. New York: Doubleday and Company, Inc., 1968.; Rodriquez, Antonio. *A History of Mexican Mural Painting*. London: Thames & Hudson, 1969.

³¹ Herrera. *Frida*: 14.; Tibol, Rachel. *Frida Kahlo: An Open Life*. Translated by Elinor Randall. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1983: 12.; There is no statement as to whether this was an unusual treatment or if this was customary for treating polio.

friend, who was agile and danced, which Frida was unable to do.³² Once she returned to school the other children teased her because of her skinny leg.³³

At the age of fifteen, in 1922, Frida enrolled in the National Preparatory School in Mexico City to prepare for a professional career as a physician. Women had just recently been admitted to the school, and Frida was one of thirty-five girls in a school of over two thousand.³⁴ Ever the trouble maker, Frida joined a gang of school children called the *Cachuchas*, derived from the caps they wore, and known at the school for their intelligence as well as their mischief. Many of Frida's life long friends came from this group, including her first boyfriend, Alejandro Gómez Arias.³⁵ Also during these years Frida first saw the famous muralist Diego Rivera. He had been given a commission to paint a mural in the Preparatoria's auditorium. Frida enjoyed playing pranks on the muralist.³⁶ She took food

³² Herrera. *Frida*: 14-15.; Frazier, Nancy. *Frida Kahlo: mysterious painter*. Conn.: Blackbirch Press, 1992: 8.; Tibol: 12-13. Refers to Dr. Henriette Begun, who wrote Kahlo's clinical history in 1946. According to this account the incident as took place in 1918. It is also not referred to directly as being polio, rather as a "slight atrophy in right leg with slight shortening and foot turned outward" caused by a blow from a tree trunk. Tibol's report states that some doctors thought it to be from polio or "white tumor" (chronic tuberculous arthritis).

³³ Herrera. *Frida*: 15.; Frazier.: 17-18.; Kettenmannn, Andrea. *Frida Kahlo, 1907-1954: pain and passion*. Koln: Benedikt Taschen, 1993: 10.

³⁴ Herrera. *Frida*: 25.; Zamora.: 19.

³⁵ Garcia, Rupert. *Frida Kahlo: A Bibliography and Biographic Introduction*. Berkeley: University of California, Chicano Studies Library Publications Unit, 1983: 1-2; Frazier.: 31-2.

³⁶ Herrera. *Frida*: 31.; Frazier.: 22-24.

from his lunch basket, teased his models, and one time she soaped the stairs coming down from the stage where Rivera was painting.³⁷

Late in the afternoon on September 17, 1925, Frida suffered a terrible accident, that changed her life forever. On her way home from the university the bus she was riding on collided with a trolley car. Bodies flew everywhere, Alejandro was thrown under the trolley but received only minor injuries. Frida had been thrown from the bus as well. Somehow the force of the impact had ripped off her dress and blood covered her body. A passenger had been carrying a bag of gold dust that burst from the impact. When found her body glistened from blood mixed with gold dust. Witnesses called her “la bailarina” because she looked like a beautiful dancer amidst all the blood and gore of the accident.³⁸

From the accident Frida suffered numerous afflictions: her spinal column had been broken in three places in the lumbar region; her collarbone and third and fourth ribs were broken; her right leg had eleven fractures and right foot was dislocated and crushed; her left shoulder also dislocated; her pelvis was broken in three places; an iron handrail penetrated her abdomen by entering through her left hip and tearing her left labia while exiting

³⁷ Frazier.: 31.; Herrera. *Frida*.: 31.

³⁸ Drucker.: 25.; Herrera. *Frida*.: 47.

through her vagina.³⁹ Due to the accident Frida also suffered an acute peritonitis.⁴⁰ When first brought to the Red Cross Hospital, no one expected her to live. However, after numerous procedures Frida returned home on October 17, one month after the accident. A spinal fracture had not been recognized by doctors until Dr. Ortiz Tirado ordered Frida immobilized with a plaster corset for nine months. After three or four months of the corset Frida suddenly felt her entire right side become numb. This phenomenon resolved itself with injections and massages. At the removal of the corset Frida resumed a “normal” life, but from then on she had sensations of constant fatigue and at times pain in her backbone and right leg, which never left her. The remainder of her life revolved around her medical problems, including numerous surgical procedures.

Reflecting upon her tragic and prolific life many in Mexico have espoused to the idea that the accident was in a sense, no accident. For Frida to become the image that she did something miraculous needed to transform her life. The accident thus “ helped her walk the road, not of life, but of art. It gave her a pictorial imagination without her having to avail herself of the

³⁹Herrera. *Frida*. : 49; Poniatowska, Elena and Carla Stellweg. *Frida Kahlo: The Camera Seduced*. San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 1992: 17.; Tibol: 13. Adds to the list the dislocation of left elbow.

⁴⁰Acute peritonitis: inflammation of the peritoneum (membrane lining the abdominopelvic walls); a condition marked by exudations in the peritoneum of serum, fibrin, cells, and pus. It is attended by abdominal pain and tenderness, constipation, vomiting, and moderate fever. Cystitis: inflammation of the urinary bladder.

wealth of art already in existence.”⁴¹ It was not until after the accident that Frida began to paint. While recuperating she asked to use her father’s paints. As a photographer, Guillermo Kahlo kept a box of paints for touching up his photographs. In an effort to ease her daughter’s pain, Matilde Kahlo had a special easel designed for Frida that could be used while laying in bed.⁴²

Once Frida recovered enough to go out she took a few of her paintings to Diego Rivera. Frida requested that he look at her work and give an honest opinion as to whether she should continue painting.⁴³ Diego took an interest in the young Frida and began visiting her in her father’s home.

During this time Frida also joined the Communist Party. The Communist Party had at least two possible attractions for the young Frida. She may have first been fascinated with the party due to the fact that its leaders were also the prominent artists of the time: Diego Rivera, David Alfaro Siqueiros, José Clemente Orozco, and Xavier Guerrero. With the administration of José Vasconcelos, then minister of public education, they promoted their politics through a dramatic public-art policy. The Party held another attraction for Frida; that of the independent and outgoing women from whom Frida sought inspiration. For example, her friend Tina Modotti,

⁴¹ Billeter, Erika. Editor. *The World of Frida Kahlo: The Blue House*. translated by Kathleen Jameson-Cemper, Edith M. Pross and Arturo Sanches. Frankfurt am Main: Schirn Kunsthalle, 1993: 11.

⁴² Kettenmann.: 18.

⁴³ Herrera. *Frida*.: 87.

whose “autonomy and bohemian life represented a plausible model to which Frida may have aspired.”⁴⁴

In the succeeding years following Frida’s accident her relationship with Alejandro wavered and by June 1928, Alejandro and Frida’s relationship had ended.⁴⁵ Soon afterwards Frida began a relationship with Diego Rivera. They were eventually married on August 21, 1929.

Their wedding was widely reported on by the international as well as the local press.⁴⁶ It was said to have been a marriage between an elephant and a dove, with Diego being a middle-aged and overweight man of some 300 pounds, while Frida was young and barely weighed 100 pounds. Nonetheless, the couple seemed to feed off each other’s dependency of the other. Frida’s father favored the marriage, Diego was rich enough to afford his daughter’s medical expenses. Her mother, however, disapproved of the match, referring to Diego as an ugly, fat, 42 year old Communist and a non-Catholic.⁴⁷

In November 1930, Frida and Diego moved to San Francisco where Diego had been given a commission to paint murals in the San Francisco Stock Exchange Luncheon Club and the California School of Fine Arts (now San Francisco Art Institute). This was the beginning of a four year stay

⁴⁴ Lowe.: 19-20.

⁴⁵ Herrera, *Frida*.: 80.

⁴⁶ The Mexican paper *La Prensa* covered the wedding in the August 23, 1929 edition.

in the United States. Among the many people Frida befriended was Leo Eloesser, a famous thoracic surgeon. For the rest of her life Frida would refer to Eloesser for medical advice. She first consulted him in December of 1930 regarding her injured spine.⁴⁸

After their stay in San Francisco, the couple traveled to Detroit where Diego had accepted a commission to paint murals celebrating Detroit industry in April 1932. While in Detroit, Frida consulted a doctor regarding being pregnant. Considering her damaged pelvis, Frida felt she should abort the fetus. The doctor who examined her in Detroit advised her to continue with the pregnancy and have a Caesarean section. Frida wrote her friend Dr. Eloesser for advice, but before hearing his response she decided to follow the counsel of her doctor in Detroit. However, late in the night on July 3, 1932, Frida was rushed to the hospital. She had been loosing huge clots of blood. Frida was 3 ½ months into the pregnancy when she miscarried.⁴⁹ This experience led Frida to paint the first of a series of bloody and terrifying self-portraits that were to make her known as one of the most original painters of her time. She first painted *Henry Ford Hospital* in response to her miscarriage. After hearing of her mother's illness and subsequent death,

⁴⁷ Herrera. *Frida*.: 99.

⁴⁸ Ibid.: 120.

⁴⁹ Ibid.: 140-3; Kamin, 44-50; Frazier, 49.

Frida painted *My Birth*. Both paintings belong to a series depicting incidents in her life.⁵⁰

Once Diego finished the mural in Detroit the couple traveled to New York, and eventually home to Mexico. A year later, Diego began an affair with Frida's sister Cristina. At one point during the affair, Frida moved out of the house. Although this was not Diego's first affair, this was the first of many separations. As always happened when Diego stopped paying attention to Frida, her health declined. Thus, at the same time as the affair, Frida was hospitalized at least three times. The first time to have her appendix removed. Next she had an abortion performed after three months of pregnancy. Finally, she had an operation due to foot problems that had troubled her earlier and had since grown worse.⁵¹

The tragic accident that Frida suffered in her youth transformed her from a school girl into a young woman with an inward looking side of depression and loneliness. Likewise, Diego's affair with Cristina changed her from an admiring bride into a complicated woman. She could no longer be the mere wife to her 'important' husband, she now had to be independent.⁵² Eventually Frida forgave Cristina and even Diego. Once

⁵⁰ Ibid.: 143-4, 154-7.

⁵¹ Billeter. *The World of Frida Kahlo*: 250.; Herrera. *Frida*: 182.

⁵² Herrera. *Frida*: 192.

reunited the couple's home became a Mecca for the international intelligentsia.

On January 9, 1937, Leon and Natalia Trotsky came to Mexico. Diego had personally requested asylum for them from President Cárdenas. They were to stay in Frida's home in Coyoacan.⁵³ Trotsky attempted an affair with Cristina, but to no avail. However, for Frida to have an affair with Trotsky may have seemed the perfect revenge against Diego's affair with her sister. Frida was 29, Trotsky was in his 60s. Due to Trotsky's entourage who feared a scandal if the affair became public, it ended as Trotsky left Frida's house on July 7, to stay at a farm for a while.⁵⁴

Frida began to pursue her professional career as a painter in more earnest once this affair had ended. She painted on a more regular basis and began developing her technical skills.⁵⁵ Nevertheless, Frida's attitude toward her work never truly became that of a professional. She never pushed for exhibitions, patrons, or reviews as did other professional artists. It was Diego who encouraged the sale of her art work. In 1938, Diego convinced the American film star Edward G. Robinson to buy four of Frida's paintings.⁵⁶

⁵³ Kettenmannn.: 41.; Herrera. *Frida*: 204.

⁵⁴ Herrera. *Frida*: 209-10.

⁵⁵ Ibid:215.

⁵⁶ Billeter. *The World of Frida Kahlo*: 251.; Herrera. *Frida*: 228.

In April of 1938, the surrealist poet and essayist André Breton came to Mexico to see Trotsky. Breton believed Mexico to be a surrealist nation and labeled Frida a surrealist, stating that her work was “a ribbon around a bomb.”⁵⁷ Breton convinced Frida to take part in an exhibit in Paris in 1939. Prior to this Frida exhibited at New York’s Julien Lévy Gallery, and Breton wrote an essay on her for the exhibition brochure.⁵⁸

In October 1938, Frida left Mexico with photographer Nickolas Muray, with whom she was having an affair, for her exhibition in New York. The exhibit was well received. Even though it was during the Depression Era, half of the paintings sold. In January, during a period in which an unstable Europe verged on war, Frida sailed for France. This experience was less fulfilling than the one in New York. The exhibit Breton had promised while in Mexico had been delayed. Also due to the rising threat of war, the exhibition was not financially successful. Additionally, a follow-up exhibit had been scheduled in a London gallery, but was canceled.⁵⁹

⁵⁷ “Bomb Beribboned” *Time*. November 14, 1938: 29. This appears to be the first international printing that focuses on Frida Kahlo rather than merely mentioning her as the ‘wife’ of muralist Diego Rivera. Thus this is the first indication of Frida as an artist in her own right.

⁵⁸ Herrera. *Frida*: 228.

⁵⁹ Kettenmannn.: 51.; Billeter, Erika. “Frida Kahlo” *Southwest Art*. V23n3, August 1, 1993: 94. One of the her pieces sold to the Louvre. It is now located in the Centre Georges Pompidou.

During her stay in Paris, Frida became sick and had to spend time in the American Hospital for a “colibacterial inflammation of the kidneys.”

Frida elaborated upon her condition in a letter to Ella and Bertram Wolfe:

You see, I had my belly full of anarchists and every one of them would have put a bomb in some corner of my poor intestines. I felt that until this moment the situation was hopeless since I was sure that *la pelona* was going to take me away.⁶⁰

Once Frida returned to Mexico, she and Diego separated. By September they had begun divorce proceedings. Diego moved to San Francisco shortly afterwards. Diego’s move, however, was due in part to escape from questioning in regards to an assassination attempt made on Trotsky. Because Diego had fled the country, the police picked up Frida and interrogated her for twelve hours and held her in jail for two days.⁶¹

Meanwhile, Frida’s health also began to decline. Diego consulted with Frida’s friend Dr. Eloesser who wrote Frida and asked her to come to San Francisco. In September, one year after the divorce, Frida decided to fly to San Francisco. Dr. Eloesser convinced the couple to remarry.⁶² They decided to remarry on December 8, 1940, on Diego’s 54th birthday. Frida, in comparison, was only 30. Their relationship had changed, Frida had “gained self-confidence and financial and sexual independence and was a recognized

⁶⁰ Herrera. *Frida*: 241-3.

⁶¹ Billeter. *The World of Frida Kahlo*: 256.; Herrera. *Frida*: 295-7.

artist.”⁶³ Frida returned to Mexico before Diego did.⁶⁴ Shortly after her return her father died, sending her into a state of depression.⁶⁵

In the early 1940s, the threat of a world war increased international tensions. When, in 1941, Stalin’s belated opposition to Hitler led the Germans to invade Russia, Frida drew closer to the Communist Party. Mexico began experiencing an economic boom due to its raw materials being in heavy demand for American armament factories.⁶⁶ It was during this time that, perhaps as a result of the acclaim that came from her exhibitions abroad, and from her participation in the big International Exhibition of Surrealism⁶⁷ in Mexico City, Frida’s career took on momentum. Along with recognition came patrons and commissions. Frida also received a teaching position, a prize, and a fellowship. She participated in cultural organizations, conferences, and art projects. Additionally, she published an occasional article.⁶⁸ She took part in at least twenty group exhibits. Two of the most well known exhibits were: “Twenty Centuries of

⁶² Herrera. *Frida*: 298.; “Mr. and Mrs. Rivera Again” *Art Digest*. December 15, 1940: 8.; Billeter. *The World of Frida Kahlo*: 256.

⁶³ Kettenmann.: 57.

⁶⁴ “Diego to Come Later” *Art Digest*. January 1, 1941: 23.

⁶⁵ Herrera. *Frida*: 310.

⁶⁶ Kettenmann.: 61.

⁶⁷ Del Conde, Teresa. “Frida Kahlo Pintora” in *Frida Kahlo: exposicion nacional de homenaje*. Mexico City: Instituto Nacional de Bellas Artes, 1977.

⁶⁸ Herrera. *Frida*.: 316.

Mexican Art” at New York’s Museum of Modern Art,⁶⁹ and the “Mexican Art Today” exhibit at Philadelphia Museum of Art.⁷⁰ During this time Frida was also recommended for a Guggenheim scholarship by Meyer Schapiro.⁷¹ In response to Frida’s increasing reputation she was chosen to be a founding member of the Seminario de Cultura Mexicana in 1942. This organization was made up of twenty-five artists and intellectuals who espoused the ideals of spreading Mexican culture through lectures, exhibitions, and publications.

By the end of the 1940s, Frida had established herself as an artist. She was included in most of the major group exhibitions. Also by this time the Mexican ‘art scene’ had begun changing as well. Murals were still the dominant art form, yet they did not take such strong precedence over easel painting as they had previously done.⁷²

By 1944, Frida’s health began declining once more. After numerous procedures she underwent bone surgery as well as a battery of tests which concluded that she might have syphilis.⁷³

In 1946, Frida traveled to New York with her sister Cristina. She went to consult with Dr. Philip D. Wilson. Under his care she underwent a

⁶⁹ “Mexico’s Art Through Twenty Centuries Installed in Modern Museum” *Art Digest*. June 1, 1940: 15 & 34.; Billeter. *The World of Frida Kahlo*.: 256.

⁷⁰ Grafly, Dorothy. “Deeply National Art of Old Mexico Presented in Philadelphia.” *Art Digest*. April 15, 1943: 8.

⁷¹ Billeter. *The World of Frida Kahlo*.: 11.

⁷² Herrera. *Frida*.: 319.

difficult surgical operation where a piece of bone from her pelvis was removed and placed in her spinal column.⁷⁴ After the operation she was made to wear an iron corset. At first she appeared to recover well, even though she was restricted to being bedridden. However, after her return to Mexico, Frida's condition deteriorated. Frida became prone to mood swings, from euphoria to deep depression, and even occasional fits of paranoia. She became violent at times. To ease the constant pain she consumed large quantities of alcohol. She also became addicted to doses of Demerol and other drugs.⁷⁵ Frida became obsessed with her medical condition as her health worsened. By this time she was also seeing a psychiatrist.⁷⁶

Even with the extreme pain from her operation Frida continued to paint. She had been elected to receive a government grant and was awarded a prize from the Secretaría de Educación Pública.⁷⁷ For the next few years she took part in many group exhibits in Mexico. However, by 1949 her health began to deteriorate further.

In March of 1950, Frida underwent another surgery on her spine. This proved to be disastrous, the inserted bone became infected and had to

⁷³ Wasserman and Kahn tests were given to Frida numerous times. Only once did the tests prove positive for syphilis, thus never able to positively prove that she had the disease.

⁷⁴ Billeter. *The World of Frida Kahlo*.: 258.; Tibol: 16-17.

⁷⁵ According to the DSM4 Frida was suffering from a severe case of depression.

⁷⁶ Zamora.: 118. Frida was the first woman in Mexico to undergo psychoanalysis.

⁷⁷ Billeter, *The World of Frida Kahlo*.: 258.

be removed in July.⁷⁸ This operation made seven thus far on her spine alone.

Frida's sister Matilde wrote to Dr. Eloesser describing the details:

on removing one of her orthopedic corsets, the medical staff found a purulent abscess, which again sent her to the operating room, how the smell of 'a dead dog' emanated from another wound that would not heal, and how the blackened tips of the toes of Frida's infected foot fell off spontaneously.⁷⁹

Lola Alvarez Bravo, owner of the Galeria Arte Contemporaneo decided to hold a solo exhibit of Frida's work in 1953. This was her first solo exhibit in the country of her birth. Frida's health was so bad that doctors advised her not to attend the opening reception. However, nothing could deter Frida from the gallery that night. She had ordered her bed to be delivered to the gallery and set in the center where she would be surrounded by her paintings. The gallery was swarming with hundreds of people trying to get in to see if the artist would actually make an appearance when an ambulance pulled up in front of the gallery. Frida was carried into the gallery on a stretcher and placed upon her bed. Dressed in her Tehuana clothing Frida entertained her guests from her bed. In describing the event author Anita Brenner stated "The room was filled with energy, all of it focused on

⁷⁸ Ibid.: 259.; Zamora.: 122.; Kettenmann.: 79.

⁷⁹ Zamora.: 122.

Frida, who drew it in like oxygen. People lined up to greet her, pay her homage, but there was also a feeling they were saying good bye.”⁸⁰

Shortly after her solo exhibit, Frida’s right foot was amputated due to gangrene. She knew the amputation would be the beginning of her complete disintegration. She refused to walk, to see anyone, or to paint for some time after the operation. In her art she exposed her physical pain and her broken heart but in real life she tried to hide the fact that she wanted attention for her suffering and pain. Many authors say that she did not want to endure pity from others.⁸¹

A diary entry of April 27, 1954, suggests a recovery from a crisis, possibly a suicide attempt. Frida had been hospitalized from April 19 through 27, and again from May 6 through 12.⁸² By this time Frida had lost control of both her physical and mental states. Her dependence on drugs had increased as she consumed large quantities of alcohol. While still convalescing from bronchial pneumonia, on July 2, she took part in a demonstration protesting U.S. intervention in Guatemala. Less than two weeks later, on July 13, Frida was reported dead. The official report claimed

⁸⁰ Brenner, Anita. “Partial Retrospective at Bravo Gallery” *Art News*. V52, June 1953: 55.; Also see: Drucker.: 138.

⁸¹ Drucker :140. However, those in the Psychological field believe Kahlo suffered from the psychological condition of Munchausen syndrome in which a person willingly undergoes unnecessary medical procedures or over-exaggerates existing conditions in order to gain attention and pity. For further information see: Herrera, Hayden. “Frida

her death was due to pulmonary embolism. Some, however, believe it to have been suicide.⁸³

The last page in Frida's diary is a painting which is described by the editor of her published diary as an

image of apocalyptic chaos and reckoning, of transfiguration and transportation. The heavens open, the sky is bathed in a pink light, rain and sunshine occur simultaneously. Who is the green-winged creature who floats toward the edges of the page? The crown implies it is a sovereign of heaven, but its blackened, wrapped legs and trail of blood speak of Kahlo's wholly subjective image of herself. The death she mocked but also feared, the end she longed for but fought valiantly against, is upon her.⁸⁴

A few pages earlier Frida wrote in her diary, "I hope the leaving is joyful- and I hope never to return."⁸⁵ Although Frida wrote this in regard to leaving the hospital many believe there is a double meaning in her words, referring to her frequent thoughts of death.⁸⁶

Frida's life inspired numerous other lives in the country of her birth as well as outside. Shortly after her death Mexican newspapers began

Kahlo: The Palette, the Pain, and the Painter" *Artforum*. March 1983: 66; Lipsitt, Don R. "The Munchausen Mystery" *Psychology Today*. February 1983: 78-79.

⁸² Billeter. *The World of Frida Kahlo*: 261.

⁸³ Herrera. *Frida*: 421-431.

⁸⁴ *The Diary of Frida Kahlo: An Intimate Self-Portrait*. Introduction by Carlos Fuentes, essay and commentaries by Sarah M. Lowe. New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1995: 287.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*: 285.

⁸⁶ Herrera. *Frida*: 345-6.

publishing articles celebrating her life and speaking of her influence. One such article by Antonio Rodriguez states:

Frida Kahlo for her heroism in dominating the blows of life, overcoming to the disastrous effects of the tragedy, sister to those men of exceptional law. For that reason the tragedy that proved it, produced in her one of the most vigorous, deep and expressive artists of our days: the only woman artist from Mexico worthy of figuring, together with Sister Inès of the Cross, beside the highest values of their country.⁸⁷

This statement indicates how loved Frida was in Mexico and to what great honor she was thought of. It also alludes to the fact of her becoming an icon by placing her in association with the revered Sister Inès of the Cross. She is also being remembered for her ‘tragic’ life, that which later makes her become a saint of the afflicted, and an icon for suffering.

⁸⁷ Rodriguez, Antonio. “Frida Kahlo: heroine del dolor” *Novedades*. July 17, 1955: 4.

ICON FOR MEDICAL AND PSYCHOLOGICAL PROFESSIONS

Among the numerous writings on Frida Kahlo are several by those who have personally known and interviewed the artist. She is typically remembered in these writings as a cheerful person full of laughter, always able to entertain her guests. She is remembered for being light-hearted among others even while she was living through some of the most physically painful times of her life. It is said that Frida loved life with a force, “with the intensity that is the gift of those who have suffered deeply, or have heard the wings of death beating.”⁸⁸

Although Frida’s friends remember her as always being happy and cheerful her clinical history records another side of her life, a dark and despairing side. The publication of Frida’s tragic clinical history has led to the image of Frida as the “Tragedy Princess of modern art, our Lady of

⁸⁸ Horton, Anne. “Fridamania” *Art & Auction*. V14n4 (Nov. 1, 1991): 127.

Sorrows.”⁸⁹ This image reflects the numerous self-portraits in which she exercised her physical sufferings. It was through her art that Frida was able to cope with her physical pain.

It is Frida’s ability to live through her sufferings that, in the late 1980s, has gained the interest of those in the medical and psychological professions. There are those in the medical field who look to Frida’s work for a means of understanding suffering, or at least the depiction of suffering and the ability to overcome it. Likewise, the psychological field looks to Frida’s work for explanations of the mental suffering she endured. Her paintings record with precise autobiographical detail painful and emotional chapters in a life that was both bizarre and universal. Images of damaged and violated women creep from Frida’s paintings as she charts her miscarriages, her marriages to Diego Rivera, physical pain, and approaching death. Through the many attacks to her body Frida has been able to remain “strong in the face of adversity”⁹⁰ through her art. As stated by author Therese Southgate, “she found a way to discuss illness that went beyond the impersonal objective terms of the natural sciences to the intensely personal and subjective language of color and form.”⁹¹

⁸⁹ Ibid.: 128.

⁹⁰ Knafo, Danielle. “The Mirror, the Mask, and the Masquerade in the Art and Life of Frida Kahlo” *The Annual of psychoanalysis*. V21, 1993:227.

⁹¹ Southgate, M. Therese. The Cover: *JAMA: The Journal of the American Medical Association*. V265n2 (January 9, 1991): 169.

Frida's art thus became of interest to the medical field as exemplified in an article entitled *Medical imagery in the art of Frida Kahlo*.⁹² This article, co-authored in 1989, by an art history student and a nurse, sparked an interest in Frida that caught fire in the medical profession. Since then articles in medical journals have discussed Frida's life as well as her art. With this advent medical professionals began looking at her art as a source of inspiration.

By the late 1980s the medical profession had begun discussing courses on enhancing caring skills, particularly among the nursing education. Such courses include discussions on art, literature, poetry, and music. In the early 1990s Dr. Darbyshire began using the art of Frida Kahlo in the course he designed entitled *Understanding Caring Through Arts and Humanities*. This course, taught at the Department of Nursing and Community Health at Glasgow Caledonian University, is the first of its kind in the United Kingdom.⁹³ The ideal of the course is the introduction of an

educational approach to promote more esthetic and less instrumental thinking and understanding. This approach enables nurses to gain a deeper understanding of the lived experiences of suffering, chronic pain, miscarriage, and

⁹² Lomas, David. and Howell, Rosemary. "Medical imagery in the art of Frida Kahlo" *British Medical Journal*. V299, 1584-87.

⁹³ Darbyshire, Philip. Ph.D., MN. "Understanding caring through arts and humanities" *Journal of Advanced Nursing*. V19, 1994: 856-863.

disability through engaging with the art of Mexican painter
Frida Kahlo.⁹⁴

Through this course teacher and student work together through study and dialogue of a variety of artwork in order to gain a deeper understanding of human experiences of illness and disability as well as the care which should accompany each situations. This process is best done through viewing artwork due to the fact that an artist's portrayal of human experience is often more vivid or powerful.⁹⁵ The importance of this class is made evident in a remark made by Starck and McGovern when discussing suffering:

Often it cannot be seen on the surface because we humans hide our suffering as we attempt to disguise our vulnerability. After all we live in a society that does not encourage weakness or the admission of weakness, one that prefers that the ugliness of suffering remain invisible.⁹⁶

The work of Frida Kahlo is used in this course due to its powerful impact upon the viewers, in this case students. Students are to examine Frida's work to look for "new ways of thinking, learning, and understanding in relation to the lived experience of human suffering."⁹⁷ Frida Kahlo's work is especially revealing because of its intimate relationship with her personal biography. Frida's tragic clinical history included misguided

⁹⁴ Darbyshire, Philip, Ph.D., MN. "Understanding the Life of illness: Learning through the art of Frida Kahlo." *Ans., advances in nursing science*. V17n1 (September 1, 1994): 51.

⁹⁵ Ibid.: 52-53.

⁹⁶ Starck, PL and McGovern, JP. *The Hidden Dimension of Illness: Human Suffering*. New York: National League of Nursing, 1992: xi.

surgery as well as forcing her to spend months in bedrest. She had to wear a succession of orthopedic body braces, which often caused painful skin ulcers and abscesses. Throughout her life Frida wore twenty-eight corsets; one of steel, three of leather, and the rest of plaster.⁹⁸ At least twenty-five X-rays were taken of her spine, right leg and foot.⁹⁹ The damage to Frida's pelvis prevented her from carrying a pregnancy to term, thus she endured three miscarriages and at least two abortions.¹⁰⁰

By viewing Frida's work students are offered the opportunity to study the reactions of a patient who has greatly suffered, experiencing more than the average person could bear in their lives. Lomas and Howell noted that "in Western art scenes of childbirth are rare and visual accounts of abortion or miscarriage non-existent."¹⁰¹ Frida Kahlo occupied this most forbidden of women's spaces in her paintings of children and miscarriages.

Frida's pain was not only physical. She suffered mental anguish from her marriage to a philandering husband on top of the anguish of her miscarriages and other physical sufferings. Therefore, Frida Kahlo's art is

⁹⁷ Darbyshire. "Understanding the Life of Illness": 53.

⁹⁸ Herrera. *Frida*. : 345-6.

⁹⁹ Ibid.: 349.

¹⁰⁰ Darbyshire. "Understanding the Life of Illness": 53.

¹⁰¹ Lomas D, and Howell R.:1584.

extremely useful in promoting the skills of caring. According to Dr.

Darbyshire

Her work addresses human experiences such as pain, disability, illness, loneliness, hospitalization, miscarriage, and emotional distress and reveals a strength of spirit that elevates Frida from being merely a suffering victim.¹⁰²

Many authors have alluded to the fact that Frida suffered from a fear of abandonment. This is first seen in her relationship with her mother. Frida traced her dread of abandonment back to the time of her birth.¹⁰³ She indicates that the experience of bonding never took place between them, nor that she was able to fully separate from her mother. Rather than dwell on her attachment with her mother Frida sought to fulfill her needs through friends, lovers, and especially through her attachment with her husband.

Frida experienced her fear of abandonment early in her life. The bout with polio affected her in many ways. She was teased by other children and nicknamed “peg-leg” because her right leg always remained smaller than her left. She had invented an imaginary friend to keep her company during the nine months of recuperation. She also suffered abuse from family members. Her half-sister Margarita teased Frida saying that she did not belong to either parent but was found in the trash. Frida later said she responded to this by

¹⁰² Darbyshire. “Understanding the life of illness”: 54.

becoming introverted. However, this only affected her because she had already begun to feel a distance from her mother.

Due to her lack of attachment with her mother some authors in the psychological profession have stated that Frida looked to Diego as a second parental figure to make up for what she lacked in her mother as well as an opportunity to recreate the relationship she had with her father.¹⁰⁴ Grimberg has noted the similarity of Frida's passion to Diego with that of a story she liked as a child. In the story a young girl named Selvaggia falls in love with the older Paolo Uccello, a fifteenth century Florentine Painter. As with Frida, Selvaggia is first attracted to the other's paintings. Diego included Frida's image in his paintings, as Paolo did with Selvaggia's image. Selvaggia begins to feel that Paolo will never love her as fully as she wishes, she therefore starves herself to death. Likewise, Frida suffers under the pain of Diego's inability to fully love her.¹⁰⁵ While in Europe, Diego had admired Uccello's work. Diego remarked in his autobiography how Frida gained his attention. He also said that Frida yearned for acknowledgment from him, which he never provided, and that he treated her sadistically, stating: "If I liked a woman, the more I liked her, the more I wished to hurt her. Frida

¹⁰³ Grimberg, Salomon. *Frida Kahlo*. Meadows Museum, Dallas: Southern Methodist University. 1989: 66. Footnote #3, Lucienne Bloch recorded in her diary that the painting *My Birth* was painted in reaction to her mother's death.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid.: 11-14

¹⁰⁵ Ibid.: 16.

wasn't but the most obvious victim of this disagreeable trait of mine.”¹⁰⁶

Frida therefore, like Selvaggia, suffered from emotional starvation from the man she loved. Frida, who had first feared the abandonment by her mother, now felt abandonment by her husband. In 1935, Diego had begun an affair with Kahlo's younger sister Cristina. This affair above all others devastated Frida.¹⁰⁷

In her fear of abandonment from Diego she desperately groped at measures to keep him near her. Frida's extensive clinical history had taught her that her illness could work in her favor. “We indulge in our ills in order to protect ourselves,”¹⁰⁸ she wrote in her diary. Beyond using her illness as a self-defense mechanism, Frida used it to gain attention. She noticed how attentive Diego was whenever she was ill and how he paid less attention to her when she was healthy. “Frida used Diego as a barometer for her pain. As long as Diego did as she wished, Frida's pain diminished, but if, Diego expressed a mind of his own, Frida's pain increased.”¹⁰⁹ Herrera states that Frida made herself into a “tragic victim and a heroic sufferer. One role

¹⁰⁶ Grimberg, Salomon. “Frida Kahlo's Memory: The Piercing of the Heart by the Arrow of Divine Love” *Women's Art Journal* V2 (Fall 1990/Winter 1991): 4. Quote from: Rivera, Diego and Gladys March. *Mi Arte, Mi Vida*. Mexico: Editorial Herrero, S.A., 1963: 101-4, 224.

¹⁰⁷ Grimberg. *Frida Kahlo*: 18-19.

¹⁰⁸ *The Art of Frida Kahlo*. Introduction by Teresa del Conde, Translated by Martha Zamora. Adelaide Festival, 1990: 5; del Conde states that this was written in Frida Kahlo's diary on February 4, 1954, yet this date does not appear in the printed version of Frida's diary.

¹⁰⁹ Grimberg. *Frida Kahlo*: 41.

brought pity, the other admiration.”¹¹⁰ Regardless of how Frida depicted herself, wounded, weeping, cut open or bleeding, she always appeared as a survivor.

Frida’s beloved friend Dr. Eloesser believed that many of her operations were unnecessary. If this was the case Frida may have suffered from misguided surgery as well as possibly from the psychological disorder known as Munchausen syndrome. This disorder describes someone who uses physical pain as a tool to manipulate the people around them. They may physically abuse themselves by exacerbating an existing ailment or by creating a new one. The person then finds a hospital that will treat them for their ailment. Painkillers and sedatives are often used, and often in excess. Many with this disorder are prepared to undergo multiple invasive operations. They have, through experience, become quite convincing in their invented physical symptoms. Occasionally some with the disorder hold a resentment toward the medical profession for an earlier medical experience.¹¹¹

In Frida’s case, she seemed to alternately hold contempt for and worship her doctors. Additional personality traits may include underlying

¹¹⁰ Herrera. “Frida Kahlo: the Palette, the Pain, and the Painter” *Artforum*: 60.

¹¹¹ *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*. Third Edition-Revised. Washington, D.C.: American Psychiatric Association, 1987: 316-318.

dependent, exploitative, or masochistic behaviors, all of which Frida has been said to have according to various authors. Due to their circumstances of inflicting pain and receiving pain the Munchausen patient is both victim and victimizer.¹¹² False physical symptoms may coexist with real ones: this, Herrera believes, was the case with Frida. If, as Dr. Eloesser thought, she elected to have surgery for symptoms that she invented or for ailments that she exaggerated and that might have been treated in some less drastic way, it was probably only in the last decade of her life.

Frida's many self-portraits have been compared to masks, hiding her true feelings which are never made apparent to the viewer. By painting her image repeatedly Frida was able to deal more concretely with her pain, both physical and mental. By painting nearly only self-portraits psychoanalysts have commented on her connection with narcissism, pointing to her inability to deal with concerns other than her own.¹¹³ Psychoanalysts have categorized Frida as narcissistic, not only for her majority of self-portraits but especially due to her so called bizarre relationship to mirrors. Those with narcissistic disorders have been known to have an uncommon reaction to

¹¹² Lipsitt, Don R. "The Munchausen Mystery" *Psychology Today*. Feb. 1983: 78-79.

¹¹³ Southgate, M. Therese. The Cover *JAMA: The Journal of the American Medical Association*. V270n16 (October 1993):1899.

mirrors.¹¹⁴ It was well known that Frida had mirrors placed everywhere. Constantly concerned with her appearance, there was hardly a direction she could turn without catching her reflection in a mirror. Knafo states that her constant “reflection served as a reminder of her existence”,¹¹⁵ very important to someone who was already suffering from a fear of abandonment.

Nevertheless, her preponderance of self-portraits should not be restrictedly associated with narcissism. The fact that she was often bedridden and restricted by the confinement of her invalidism limited her subject matter, making self-portraits the easiest form of subject matter,¹¹⁶ not to mention that Frida used the self-portrait as a means of exercising her pain in a concrete manner.

However, psychoanalysts imply that Frida transformed her canvas into a mirror on which to refine herself. By constantly redefining herself in her self-portraits she was trying to obtain that which she did not receive from her mother, a concrete sense of self. Thus, in a sense her self-portraits took on the theme of mother as faulty mirror as well as replacement for her

¹¹⁴ Knafo, Danielle. “Ego Schile and Frida Kahlo: the self-portrait as mirror” *The Journal of the American Academy of Psychoanalysis*. V19n4, Winter 1990: 633.

¹¹⁵ Knafo, “The mirror, the mask, the Masquerade”: 283-4.

¹¹⁶ Harris, Ann Sutherland and Linda Nochlin. *Women Artists: 1550-1950*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1976: 335.

mother.¹¹⁷ In the context that the mirror or self-portrait as mirror replaced her mother, Frida wrote in her diary next to several small self-portrait drawings, “the one who gave birth to herself.”¹¹⁸

Frida created the image of herself that she wanted to be known. She altered information, in the end to conceal her true self and her real pain. The mask Frida created for herself refused to display her emotions, the surrounding elements of her paintings often told the story that was not revealed in her facial features. Frida was familiar with masks for they have always played a significant role in the art and culture of Mexico. Frida’s mask, however, went beyond her self-portraits to conceal her real self.

Frida’s mental anguish was transformed into physical pain, a pain she could then exercise on her canvas. Consequently, as her mental anguish increased she began to stress her physical pain. Frida protected her weakness by exaggerating her suffering. She was, however, only able to deal with physical suffering in this manner. “Even though she obviously painted as an emotional outlet for her pain, her work conveyed the message: ‘Look what

¹¹⁷ Knafo. “The mirror, the mask, the Masquerade”: 283-4.

¹¹⁸ Ibid.: 284. Knafo refers to: Herrera. *Frida*: 138.; Also see: *The Diary of Frida Kahlo*: 49. The entire passage reads: “DESIRE, The one who gave birth to herself, ICELIT, who wrote me the most marvelous poem of her whole life. I’d..give...sea...do...kiss...I love Diego and no one else.”

terrible things happened to me' rather than 'This is how these events made me feel.'"¹¹⁹

By painting her mask Frida never reveals the emotional pain she suffered, yet she reveals the fact that she obsesses over her husband by placing his image on her forehead.¹²⁰ Regardless of the consequences behind each painting, Frida does not display anger or frustration or even the sorrows she felt. Therefore, although Frida's body shown as damaged when included, her face constantly remains serene and brave. Through this means Frida seems to state that her determination and strength of character is able to conquer the limitations posed by her body.¹²¹

Death had been a looming factor in Frida's life as was loneliness, first experienced when she suffered from polio. Her paintings have taken on a grim demeanor wreathed with symbols of death, loneliness, and despair. Reflecting upon the trolley accident she wrote in her journal "we look for calm or peace because we anticipate death, since we die every moment."¹²² With this and the other sufferings in mind which Frida experienced, author Zamora stated that it is not hard to believe that she was the first woman in Mexico to undergo psychoanalysis.¹²³

¹¹⁹ Knafo. "The mirror, the mask, and the masquerade": 288.

¹²⁰ *Self-Portrait as a Tehuana* (1943); *Diego and I* (1949).

¹²¹ Knafo. "The mirror, the mask, the masquerade": 288.

¹²² Herrera. *Frida Kahlo*. Exhibition catalog: 23.

¹²³ Zamora: 118

Through her fear of abandonment, narcissism, Munchausen syndrome, and the use of a 'mask', the psychological profession looks to Frida as an icon of mental anguish. She was able to conceal her suffering from friends and family, yet exercised it on her canvases. This ability likewise attracted the medical profession to Frida and produced the icon of supreme sufferer.

ICON OF SUFFERING AND TRAGEDY IN THEATRICAL SETTING

Frida's tortured life has inspired theatrical productions as well as films. The romanticism of Frida as an invalid has led to her idealism as the model sufferer. This view has been greatly enhanced through literature and films on Frida which exaggerate her suffering.

This is most apparently exemplified in Paul Leduc's 1984 film *Frida*, where scenes portray her as being an invalid from her early years. She is shown wearing a leg brace as a child and confined to a wheelchair during her preparatory days, thus greatly exaggerating her invalidism.¹²⁴ These scenes have, however, added to the theater's interest of Frida as a martyr.

While Leduc's film may be the most talked about it was not the first exposure of Frida on film. The earliest production was a 1966 film by Karen

¹²⁴ Leduc, Paul., Director. *Frida*. Film, 108 minutes. Producer, Manuel Barbachano; 1984.; Also see: Behar, Ruth. "Latin America: Frida" *American Historical Review*. V94n4, October 1989: 1044-1046.

and David Crommie simply entitled *The Life and Death of Frida Kahlo*.¹²⁵

This film was shortly followed by a Mexican production, *Frida Kahlo*, by Marcela Fernandez-Violante at the University Nacional Autonoma de Mexico in 1971.¹²⁶

Subsequent films include a PBS Monday night special September 4, 1989.¹²⁷ Also the film *Frida Kahlo: Ribbon Around a Bomb*, a 1992 hour-long documentary. This film combines her paintings, talking heads, archival film and excerpts from the play "The Diary of Frida Kahlo", performed by Cora Cardona. CO-produced by Cardona with Ken Mandel as curator.¹²⁸ There was also a 1993 production entitled *Frida: Portrait of a Woman*.¹²⁹

Hollywood finally got into the Frida craze with Louis Valdez's 1994 film *Frida and Diego*. However, this film was never made. Valdez pulled out of the \$10 million production over controversy of casting a non-Mexican, Laura San Giacomo. Raul Julia had been cast as Diego.¹³⁰

¹²⁵ Tully: 126-133.

¹²⁶ Motian-Meadows, Mary. *Frida Kahlo: The Personal and Political*. M.A. Thesis. Fullerton: California State University, 1982: n.p. listed in biography under films.

¹²⁷ Goodman, Walter. "The Passion and the Pain of the Painter Frida Kahlo" *New York Times*. C, 26:4, September 1, 1989. (PBS. Monday, September 4th, 1989, 10pm ET)

¹²⁸ Kempley, Rita. "Frida Kahlo: A Tormented Canvas" *Washington Post*. D, 2:4, Feb. 22, 1992. Also see: James, Caryn. "The Explosive Life of Frida Kahlo" *New York Times*. C, 10:1, May 22, 1992.

¹²⁹ Anderson, Kent and David Baker. Video viewing. *School Arts*. V93n3, Nov. 1993: 45.

¹³⁰ Tully: 126-33.; Also see: Spillman, Susan. "Controversy over non-ethnic casting" *USA Today*. May 2, 1995.

At the same time that the film industry was beginning an acknowledgment of Frida the performing arts were producing plays, musicals, and dances based upon the artist's life. The first play depicting Frida's life was Frederica Schroeder Inclan's *Frida Kahlo: Viva la Vida*, at Mexico City's Instituto Nacional de Bellas Artes in 1970.¹³¹ This was followed in Mexico City by the Julio Prieto Theater's *The Two Fridas*.¹³²

In the United States the first big theatrical production was *Frida* by Hilary Blecher. The play opened at Plays and Players Theater and was performed for the American Music Theater Festival in 1991. It was also performed at the Brooklyn Academy of Music's Next Wave Festival in 1992 and then the Houston Grand Opera in June 1993. While Hilary Blecher wrote the play Migdalia Cruz co-authored the libretto. Blecher and Cruz are both known for their prior political works. However, in writing *Frida* they did not aim at writing a political piece. Rather, for Blecher, the play is about Frida's suffering, both her physical and psychological anguish. Blecher feels that Frida Kahlo "liberates women" by her extreme example of her power to "be yourself."¹³³ For G.W. Mercier, the costume and set designer, Frida was a radical more than a feminist, he saw her as being opposed to authority.

¹³¹ Motian-Meadows: n.p. listed in biography under films.

¹³² Ibid. n.p.

¹³³ Zinman, Toby Silverman. "Visions of Frida: Kahlo's tortured life is replayed on stage." *American Theatre*. V8n1, April 1, 1991: 28.; Sell also: Rockwell, John. "A

Blecher was drawn to Frida and her paintings and colorfully painful life as were many feminists. She thought of the play as creating a visual context using puppets based on pieces by Frida and Diego. Frida's paintings interacted with the play in the forms of masked figures, two and three dimensional puppets or miniature models. The quasi-operatic piece of musical theater combines six actors with nearly seventy-five puppets in an attempt to reveal real life actions with emotions from within. The play fuses the music of corridos with the art of retablos. The musical composition by Robert Xavier Rodriguez synthesized jazz, tango, and Mexican folk-tunes played by a mariachi band. The set and costumes mimic Frida's paintings and retablos in their graphic portrayals of real life events.¹³⁴

In 1992, the Mexican Museum in San Francisco tried a different approach to a play about Frida Kahlo. The Mexican artist Javier Castellanos acquired the exhibit "Pasion por Frida" which was shown at the museum during the summer of 1992. The exhibit was on the legacy of Frida Kahlo and was very successful, over 1500 people came for the opening night. A drama was performed for opening night with five of her self-portraits 'recreated in tableau vivant.' When the museum announced auditions for the play they were overwhelmed by the enormous response. Out of those

Painter's Persona and Artistry Brought to Life" *New York Times*. April 13, 1991: A,13:3.

auditioning for parts were non-Mexicans, also some men, including many 'Friditas' and cross-dressing artists.¹³⁵

On a political note there is A Traveling Jewish Theater's *Trotsky and Frida* created by Albert Greenberg, Helen Stoltzfus, and Corey Fischer in 1994. The play reconstructs the meeting between Trotsky and Frida. Greenberg and Stoltzfus did the *Trotsky and Frida: The Musical* in 1986, which was rewritten to become the newer version. The play is more about Trotsky and ideas than Frida and emotions.¹³⁶ Perhaps the intention of capitalizing upon Frida's popularity played a role in the choice of subject matter. Since the play is more about Trotsky than Frida it is apparent that she was not intended on being the main focal point, but perhaps was the selling point.

A play celebrating the life and art of Frida Kahlo entitled *Frida Kahlo: Autorretrato del dolor (self-portrait of pain)* by Grupo de Teatro Sinergia performed at William Reigh Las Angeles Photographic Center in 1995. Written, directed, and designed by Ricardo Soltero this play depicts a

¹³⁴ Ibid.:29.; Also see Rockwell: A,13:3.; Tully:126-33.; Short Takes: "Married to the Muralist" *Time*. Nov. 2, 1992:75.

¹³⁵ Tully: 126-33.; Also see: Bakewell: 165-189.

¹³⁶ Fox, Michael. "Leon Trotsky, Frida Kahlo spark ATJT's imagination" *Northern California Jewish Bulletin*. April 8, 1994: PG.; Also see: Sterling, George. "ATJT's 'Trotsky and Frida' aims high but falls short" *Northern California Jewish Bulletin*. October 20, 1995: PG.

triangle of betrayal, deception between a man, his wife, and his father.¹³⁷

This was the first largely advertised play in the United States that was aimed at the Latino community. In order to compensate for the non-Spanish speaker who wanted to see the play alternative nights were performed in English.

Two specific dances have been choreographed on Frida's life in 1996 alone. Licia Perea's one person dance *Frida*, copies the artist's likeness through costumes based on her self-portraits.¹³⁸ A more inventive rendition of her life is produced through the Jose Limon Dance Company's version entitled *Sombra y Sol (Images of Frida Kahlo)*. In this performance a bullfight is used as a metaphor for Frida's life. Her tragic experiences are transformed into symbolic representations that have their familiarity in the bullfight, the play back and forth between the bull and the matador.¹³⁹

On another note, James Newton has composed a *Suite for Frida Kahlo*. This is a four part suite inspired by Frida. It reflects the dedication

¹³⁷ Apaza, Nelly. "Teatro en espanol: senales de crecimiento; Ruben Amavizca, director" *La Opinion*. January 21, 1995: PG.; Also see: Arroyo, Blanca. "Frida angelina cumple las cien" *La Opinion*. July 12, 1995: PG.; de la Cruz, Elena. "Variedad de artes inspira nuevo espacio cultural Unity Center: Grupos" *La Opinion*. January 28, 1995: PG.; Menard, Valerie. "Hispanic Calendar" *Hispanic*. V8, March 1, 1995: 84.

¹³⁸ Fisher, Jennifer. "Music and dance review: 'Frida' celebrates Kahlo's life but lacks artist's power; Home Edition." *Los Angeles Times*. January 29, 1996: F-6.; Also see the web site: <http://www.canoe.ca/ThatreReviews/frida.html>

¹³⁹ Epstein, Benjamin. "He's Busy Helping Others Watch Their Steps; UCI's McKayle Tunes Jose Limon Dancers for Tribute to Kahlo." *Los Angeles Times*. Orange County Edition, May 6, 1996: F-2.

and suffering that art demands. This composition is not intended for the casual listener.¹⁴⁰ The musical group Word of Mouth has also produced a song dedicated to Frida. Simply entitled “Frida,” the song talks about her love and attachment to Diego.¹⁴¹

Through representations in film, plays, musicals, dances and even in music Frida’s life story has been seen as a serious subject matter. Although some reproductions have tried to depict her in a whimsical fashion, her story remains the same, one of suffering and tragedy. These are precisely the characteristics that has gained her cult like status with recent portrayals in the theater setting.

¹⁴⁰ “1994: The Year in Review; Shows and Albums That Were Magic; Orange County Edition” *Los Angeles Times*. December 31, 1994: F-2.

¹⁴¹ Word of Mouth. “Frida” *Somewhere in the World*. Trova Recordings: Pacific Palisades, CA., 1995.

FRIDA KAHLO AS AN ICON TO ARTISTS

Frida Kahlo's ability to speak through her art has gained her a cult-like following among artists. Many have latched onto the psychological needs seen through her work. The need to separate and distance herself from her pain. The need to overcome her pain through representing it in her art. The need to break away from traditionally accepted modes of representation in the arts.

Artists have taken these needs and translated them into their own representations of the artist. Overall she is viewed as a martyred saint, one who was able to feel and at the same time express an iron will. In the numerous representations of Frida she is viewed in four distinct ways; political, sexual, nurturing, and the martyred saint or sufferer.

The first representations of Frida Kahlo were by her husband Diego Rivera. Frida's image was included in at least five of Diego's murals. Reflecting his strong political views Frida is viewed in a political context in nearly all of his representations. In the 1928, *Insurrection* panel of the mural series *Ballad of the Proletarian Revolution* Diego depicts Frida as a Communist militant. Her hair is cut short, she wears a man's red work shirt with a red star on its pocket, and she holds rifles and bayonets. Diego is placing her in the context of a political heroine.¹⁴²

The 1935, *The Struggle of the Classes* panel to the *Modern Mexico* mural on the left wall of the National Palace stairway reveals Frida sitting behind her sister Cristina holding a book with a political text for a boy to read. Frida wears a denim skirt, blue work shirt, a gold medallion with red star with hammer and sickle, and has short hair.¹⁴³ In 1952 Diego again represents Frida in a political context. This time she is depicted in a wheelchair holding a copy of the Stockholm Peace Petition.¹⁴⁴

Diego also depicted Frida in a sexual context. She appeared as a tattooed Aztec woman in his 1945 mural *The Great City of Tenochtitlan*, at the National Palace. Frida is represented as a courtesan girl, holding the native Indian flower "Tigredia", symbol of the goddess of love and flowers,

¹⁴² Herrera. *Frida*. 94-5.

¹⁴³ Ibid.: 184-5; *Mexican History: Diego Rivera's Frescoes in the National Palace of Mexico City*. R.S. Silva E.: Mexico City, 1961: XI.

and is surrounded by admirers offering gifts to her.¹⁴⁵ In this piece Diego represents her sexuality through her sensual appearance. Likewise, he depicts her nude in a lithograph in 1930, *Desnudo de Frida Kahlo*.¹⁴⁶

Diego depicted Frida in a nurturing context in 1947-8 in the Hotel de Prado mural. Diego portrays himself as a fat boy standing in front of an adult Frida.¹⁴⁷ In this context Diego states how his relationship with Frida was often based on her nurturing him as a mother would a child.

Aside from Diego Rivera representations of Frida were made during her life time by her students. In 1942, Frida received a teaching position working twelve hours per week at the Escuela de Pintura y Escultura “La Esmeralda.” After a few months, due to her bad health, she conducted classes at her home.¹⁴⁸ Four students remained with Frida; Fanny Rabel, Arturo Estrada, Arturo García Bustos, and Guillermo Monroy. Frida’s students became attached to her and remained in contact with her throughout the rest of her life. Their representations depict her in scenes of peace and serenity, as the nurturing mother figure.

¹⁴⁴ Herrera. *Frida*: 389. “The Nightmare of War and the Dream of Peace”

¹⁴⁵ Richmond, Robin. *Frida Kahlo in Mexico*. San Francisco: Pomegranate Artbooks, 1994: 27.; *Mexican History: Diego Rivera's Frescoes in the National Palace of Mexico City*. R. S. Silva E, 1961: XII.

¹⁴⁶ *Diego Rivera: Pintura de Caballete y Dibujos*. Mexico: Fondo editorial de la Plastica Mexicana, 1979: 116.

¹⁴⁷ Herrera. *Frida*. 376.

¹⁴⁸ Monroy, Guillermo. “Homenaje de un pintor a Frida Kahlo a los 22 años de su muerte.” *Excelsior*. July 17, 1976: 8.; Billeter, *The World of Frida Kahlo*: 256.

In 1952, Bustos and Estrada were accompanied by some of Diego's followers in repainting the mural of La Rosita. In this Frida was shown wearing a Tehuana costume. She held a peace dove and below her was shown a scroll with the words: "We love peace."¹⁴⁹

A year after her death, in June 1955, Arturo Estrada had his first one-man show at the Salon of Mexican painting. Among the paintings displayed was one entitled *Portrait of the Dead Frida Kahlo*. Frida was shown surrounded by wild flowers, "like a sleeping beauty who has found her a bed a large, flat-bottomed boat like the ones the Uruapan natives have been building and gaudily decorating since time immemorial."¹⁵⁰ In this scene Frida is no longer depicted as the nurturing mother or teacher standing over her students. She is now immortalized, seen as the idol of her students' honor.

Less than a year later, on Friday, July 13, 1956, up to forty painters got together at the Lola Alvarez Bravo Gallery to pay homage to Frida. Artists included were: Remedios Varo, Machila Armida, Celia Calderon, Lucinda Urristi, Olga Costa, Alice Rahon, Andrea Gomez, Leonora Carrington, and her student Fanny Rabel.¹⁵¹ Two years after her death, this

¹⁴⁹ Herrera. *Frida*. 403.; Tibol: 195.

¹⁵⁰ Tibol: 199-201.

¹⁵¹ *Ibid.*: 205-6. Although there is no mention as to whether this was an exhibit of entirely women artists, the assumptions may be made that it was since only female names are mentioned.

event signified the impact that Frida Kahlo's life had on artists of her own time.

Eventually artists began paying homage to Frida by placing her image in their artwork. The Chicano movement along with the feminist movement helped bring these representations to the attention of artists in the United States, to Mexican-Americans and American artists alike. Representations by these artists have predominantly viewed Frida as a martyred saint, although at times she is depicted in a nurturing context. In either case she is represented as giving strength to the artist through the example of her own life.

Author Shifra Goldman described a 'movement' among Chicano artists that lasted from 1965 through the 1980s. In this movement artists tried to cover issues that dealt with their Indigenous heritage. They embraced the pre-Columbian culture as a means of distancing themselves from Europe, in race and culture. Many artists dealt with this in different ways. Some began fusing pre-Columbian motifs with contemporary issues. Others expressed their empathy with the Native Americans who had been oppressed by European culture as well. Some also expressed empathy with the Maya who

were resisting genocide imposed by their government and backed by US aid.¹⁵²

From the Chicano art movement artists began making representations that fit in with the themes of the Virgin, Christ, and the bleeding heart or suffering of Christ or saints. Representations of Frida fit in as images of a saint, someone who had suffered as a martyred saint.

For this inspiration artists looked to the symbolism Frida used in her paintings. Her artistic language was merely the re-invention of a series of symbolic elements that revealed her as a woman, a Mexican, and a bisexual. These areas gained her interest among contemporary artists. Her resistance to participate in mainstream art and her reliance on traditional imagery appealed to conceptual artists who used images as signs. Frida also attracted artists by the fact that she alluded being labeled into any specific style of art, once she renounced the Surrealist circle.¹⁵³

Chicano artwork began moving into the mainstream with the Chicano movement of the 1960s. This, however, did not bring acceptance as

¹⁵² Goldman, Shifra M. "The iconography of Chicano self-determination: Race, ethnicity, and class" *Art Journal*. V49, June 1, 1990: 167.

¹⁵³ *El Corazon Angrante (The Bleeding Heart)*. Organized by the Institute of Contemporary Art, Boston. Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1991: 39.

Chicano work was still ignored in many museums and institutions.¹⁵⁴

Chicano artists began gathering together and creating group exhibits that were intended to bring a social revolution through art. Such was the case with the exhibit “New Symbols for La Nueva Raza” by the Mexican American Liberation Art Front (MALAF) in Oakland, 1969. This exhibit inspired a group of artists that, in 1970, established the Galeria de la Raza in San Francisco. The Galeria was founded as a non-profit community arts organization with the express purpose of promoting Chicano art and culture.¹⁵⁵

The 1978 exhibit *Frida*, at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Chicago, may be said as being responsible for starting the rash of Frida Kahlo exhibits. However, out of this exhibit also came the idea of Chicano artists displaying work of their own in homage to Frida.

The first instance of this, known to this author, is seen at the Galeria de la Raza. Rene Yanez, then director, tried to get the traveling exhibit *Frida* in the Galeria. When unable to, Yanez invited Bay Area artists to exhibit their work honoring Frida Kahlo. Although Frida’s art and life story may have been new to many of the cities that the Chicago exhibit traveled to, she was well remembered in San Francisco. Having visited and lived in San

¹⁵⁴See the web site for artist Carmen Lomas Garza:
<http://www./2.en.utexas.edu/sheila/314s96/projects/group4/carmen.html>

Francisco twice during her life Frida had many friends there who fondly remembered her. Even young artists, born after her death, had begun identifying with her.

The Galeria had, since 1974, hosted a yearly exhibit for the Day of the Dead ceremonies. However, in 1979, the homage to Frida Kahlo became the first exhibit in which a specific person was honored. Some artists included in the exhibit painted self-portraits with Frida. The highlight of the exhibit was an altar dedicated to Frida. Imogen Cunningham's portrait of Frida had been placed as the central point of the altar. Around her portrait were a few typical items of the Day of the Dead celebrations, including bone bread, sugar loaves in baskets, and sugar skulls with Diego and Frida's names. Bringing a little more personal significance to the altar were the following items; a toy bed holding a toy Frida, birds in a coffin, ribbons and fruit.

The opening night for this exhibit displayed how the Bay Area adored and remembered Frida. Women who had known Frida showed up wearing pre-Columbian necklaces that Frida had given them as gifts. They went around giving each other lip-stick kisses on the cheeks in remembrance of Frida. Amalia Mesa Bains of the Galeria said "Frida embodied the whole

¹⁵⁵ See the web site for the Galeria de la Raza Archives:
<http://www/library.ucsb.edu/speccoll/gdlr.html>

notion of culture for Chicana women. She inspired us. Her works didn't have self-pity, they had strength."¹⁵⁶

Many contemporary artists have been inspired by Frida's life and art. Herrera stated that feminist artists see Frida as a role model. She painted in a country dominated by men. She broke the barrier, the taboo of women's blood. She did not paint in the dominate muralist tradition, but on a small intimate scale. She did not paint with the audience of men in mind, but painted for herself, a woman.¹⁵⁷

Artists during the feminist movement began making representations of Frida in their art. The most widely known of these is Judy Chicago's *The Dinner Party*. This piece consisted of a table with plates designed for specific mythical and historical women through out the ages. Around the table were groups of women who were placed in relation to those at the table. Over one thousand women were represented. Criteria for those chosen included their significance to society, contributions made for women, and did their lives illustrate women's experiences and provide a model. Frida was chosen for her ability to withstand all her suffering while living in a

¹⁵⁶ Kamin: 44.

¹⁵⁷ Herrera, Hayden. *New York Times*.

male dominant society.¹⁵⁸ *The Dinner Party* was recently included in an exhibit honoring women in a Los Angeles Museum.¹⁵⁹

Miriam Schapiro, who was working on a series of homages to Frida, stated: "Frida is a real feminist artist in the sense that during a period in history when the accepted modes of truth were truth seen through men's eyes, she gave us truth seen through the eyes of woman. She painted the kinds of agonies women in particular suffer, and she had the capacity both to be feminine and to function with an iron will that we associate with masculinity."¹⁶⁰ Schapiro recently had a show entitled "A Seamless Life," which portrays relationships between female artists of the past and the contemporary. Her work was inspired in part by Frida Kahlo.¹⁶¹

Although artists, especially feminist artists, have been creating work inspired by Frida since the feminist movement began, the largest body of artists who pay homage to Frida are from the Chicano community. While non-Chicano artists seem to be inspired by Frida as a strong woman, and a feminist painter who overcame the machismo of a male dominated country,

¹⁵⁸ Chicago, Judy. *The Dinner Party: a symbol of our heritage*. Garden City, NY: Anchor Press/Doubleday, 1979: 98, 212.

¹⁵⁹ Knight, Christopher. "Art Review; More Famine Than Feast; Focusing on the Flawed 'Dinner Party' Undermines 'Sexual Politics'; Home Edition." *Los Angeles Times*. May 2, 1996: F-1.

¹⁶⁰ Herrera, *New York Times*, 1990.

¹⁶¹ See the web site in which Schapiro's exhibit portrays the relationship with female artists of the past: <http://www.jmu.edu/mediarel/sawshow.html> ; Also see Mariam Schapiro's web site regarding her work inspired by Frida: <http://www.jmu.edu/mediarel/feb 1496.html>

Chicano artists look toward Frida for deeper inspiration. It is the Chicano artists who represent her as the saint of suffering and even place her in the guise of the Virgin of Guadalupe. In Mexico she is now referred to as St. Frida of the Afflicted.¹⁶²

A local artist, Lorenzo Guel, has placed Frida's face on the image customarily recognized as the Virgin of Guadalupe. In three such collage works Guel has surrounded his Frida/Guadalupe image with pre-Columbian and Mexican symbols. One work includes a Zapatista mask. Another places a copy of Frida's self-portrait "The Broken Column" (1944), which displays her broken body, and Guel has placed this image on top of the Virgin's image. In each piece *milagros*¹⁶³ play a specific role in deciphering the work. Two of the works have milagros replacing Frida's arms and legs, three have milagros of her heart. These all represent the suffering she experienced during life that is now seen as almost sacred.¹⁶⁴ The use of milagros attached to Frida's image her cult-like status by placing her in the guise of the saint from which blessings will come.

¹⁶² See web site for artist Kathy Yancey:
http://www.cln.com/newsstand/o42096/A_BYRD.HTM

¹⁶³ Milagros (miracles) are tiny metal charms in the shape of arms, legs, eyes, a head, or a heart. These metals are pinned on the cloak or gown of a saint in church in order to beg for Divine assistance in matters of money, health or the heart. See; Richmond, Robin. :139.

¹⁶⁴ Personal interpretation from conversations with and viewing the artwork of artist Lorenzo Guel.

Mexican artist Alicia Rivero has capitalized on the Frida Kahlo cult by creating small Frida altars, called “Ofrendas”, for the Day of the Dead celebrations. On exhibit at the Art of the People Gallery during November 1996, these altars display different pictures of Frida. The altars are then decorated with miniature replicas of typical Day of the Dead offerings including pieces of bread, flowers, and *calaveras*.¹⁶⁵

Many artists relate their artwork to personal experiences that they are able to use in identifying themselves with Frida. Carmen Lomas Garza, like Frida, has overcome the suppressed role women artists have been put in. The Chicano art movement helped male artists, whose subject matter was believed to be addressable in the public sphere. However, women’s art was still held as private. Lomas Garza has been able to overcome this stigma through exhibits of her work that state her social concerns.¹⁶⁶ Among her many works, Lomas Garza created an altar to Frida Kahlo, entitled “Day of the Death: Offering to Frida Kahlo.” Present on the altar are: a picture of Frida’s painting as a Tehuana bride, a picture of Frida and Diego’s wedding,

¹⁶⁵ Art of the People Gallery, Portland Oregon. November 1996, Day of the Dead Exhibition.

¹⁶⁶ See web site for artist Carmen Lomas Garza:
<http://www/2.en.utexas.edu/sheila/314s96/projects/group4/carmen.html>

a palette with paint and brushes, a representation of the bleeding heart motif, dolls, sugar skulls, and so forth.¹⁶⁷

Artist Kathy Yancey has created an exhibit that pays homage solely to Frida, entitled “Frida Kahlo, Goddess of Art.” Yancey created the works with two reasons in mind. First, she was fascinated with the cult of Frida. Secondly, because she had recently been severely ill which, like Frida, forced her thoughts inwardly and focused on pain. Yancey visited Frida’s house in her search for the divinity of Frida and femininity. Yancey saw Frida’s house as a shrine and thus created her own shrines to Frida. Most of Yancey’s shrines are of small assemblages in boxes combining miniature toy animals, cloth flowers and vines, fabrics, cut paper shapes, and figures sculpted from cheesecloth.¹⁶⁸

Like Yancey, artist Monica Castillo depicts images of pain and symbols of suffering and martyrdom. Castillo’s piece entitled “Self-portrait With Identifying Marks” reveals sixteen pain ridden faces.¹⁶⁹

Frida’s fascination with the duality of life and death and the Day of the Dead celebrations is captured in the work by Laura Aguilar whose black

¹⁶⁷ Lomas Garza, Carmen. “Day of Death: Offering to Frida Kahlo” *Parnassus*. V17n1, 1991: 45.

¹⁶⁸ See web site for artist Kathy Yancey:
http://www.cln.com/newsstand/o42096/A_BYRD.HTM

¹⁶⁹ Ollman, Leah. “Feeling pull of Mexico’s past in ‘Espiritu’; Art review; Compelling work of 11 modern-day artists is featured, but history’s clash of cultures hovers in the background; Home Edition.” *Los Angeles Times*. October 7, 1995: F-1.

and white photographs of grave sites with flower offerings and a semi-nude self-portrait offer political overtones.¹⁷⁰

Representatives of Frida have related untold sufferings and pain as with Yancey. There are several other views of Frida as well. Artists Yreina Cervantes exhibited a small water color entitled "Homage to Frida Kahlo." This scene depicted Frida nude and pregnant with twins, and holding a picture of Cervantes' face. Thus Frida is being commemorated as a nurturing or matriarchal presence.¹⁷¹

Artist Consuelo Castaneda took a ceramic likeness of cartoon Betty Boop and placed the face of Diego Rivera on her forehead. This piece, made in 1993, is a color photograph entitled "Betty/Frida" and mimics Frida's self-portrait with Diego's face on her forehead.¹⁷²

Many artists, such as Vivian Ybarra, refer to Frida when simply trying to identify with their heritage. Her work entitled "Heritage Unspoken" is a homage to Frida.¹⁷³

¹⁷⁰ Curtis, Cathy. "Women's work; art review; the contemporary Chicana pieces in this group show delve into rich female legacies, but most of them come up dry; Orange County Edition." *Los Angeles Times*. April 9, 1996: F-1.

¹⁷¹ Woodward, Josef. "Sights; Exhibit of Latino works has a mystical quality; Paintings at Carnegie Art Museum in Oxnard are in different styles, but all portray expressions of inner life; Ventura West Edition." *Los Angeles Times*. May 12, 1994: J-4.

¹⁷² Knight, Christopher. "Independent Spirit Lives on in 'Majas'; The show at the Otis Art Gallery wobbles a bit in accomplishment, but the works are refreshing in their refusal to follow old ways of considering modern Mexican" *Los Angeles Times*. July 16, 1994: F-1.

¹⁷³ See web site of Vivian Ybarra's "Heritage Unspoken":
<http://www.acs.csulb.edu/~d49er/Issue28/28ncar.html>

Many gay artists find in Frida a source of strength due to her open liaisons with women and her unconventional approach to gender. She occasionally wore men's clothing and emphasized her mustache. Pop singer Madonna referred to her as a 'drama queen.'¹⁷⁴

Homosexual artists and writers sought out Frida during her life. Many wrote poems dedicated to her. Author Billeter stated that they were the first to recognize Frida's uniqueness.¹⁷⁵ In her art Frida never openly stated herself as bisexual, but alluded to her androgynous sexuality.

One contemporary artist who struggles with the pressures of society as did Frida, is Nahum B. Zenil. For Zenil, confronting a conservative society as a gay artist is much the same as what Frida had to deal with being a woman in a patriarchal society. Also like Frida, most of his work is of self-portraits that are said to be devoid of self-pity. He depicts himself poised as a martyred saint.¹⁷⁶ In one painting, entitled "Frida in my Heart", Zenil depicts his bare chest, revealing an oversized heart in which Frida's face is seen.¹⁷⁷

¹⁷⁴ Herrera, *New York Times*. 1990.

¹⁷⁵ Billeter. *The World of Frida Kahlo*: 189. Refers to: Salvador Novo, Xavier Villaurrutia, and Carlos Pellicer.

¹⁷⁶ See web site for Nahum B. Zenil's exhibit at Mexican Museum:
http://www.sfbayguardian.com/AnE/96_03/032796cc.html

¹⁷⁷ "Hispanic Calendar." *Hispanic*. June 1996: 80. The picture mentioned was displayed in the 80-piece exhibit entitled "Witness to the Self/Testigo del Ser", exhibited at the Mexican Museum, San Francisco through Sept 1. Zenil is from Veracruz.

Through artist representations Frida has transcended art into culture. No other artist has inspired so great a following among contemporary artists. She stands for feminism for Chicana and feminist artists and for strength for gay artists. Her ability to endure pain in her life has inspired artists who place her in the guise of the Virgin of Guadalupe, the highest honor that can be bestowed upon her. Surpassing from mere representation into saint-like status her image is now used by artists as a means to be associated with her, it has become the popular thing to do.

SUFFERING AND BEAUTY PERSONIFIED IN FASHION

Frida Kahlo's charismatic character lent itself in part to her flamboyant attire. In choosing the costume of the Tehuana women Frida identified herself with the Indian population of Mexico. She also helped to bring life to the myth of peasant as sensual. The embroidered blouse and long flowing skirts of the Tehuana costume symbolized a sexual appeal. It was most likely due to the art of flirtation enabled with the long skirts that led Frida to choose the costume.

Frida's attire drew attention where ever she went. When in New York and Paris she was said to be a "traffic stopper and a hostess's delight."¹⁷⁸ Gallery owner Julien Levy, recalls the excitement Frida created in New York when a group of children followed her into a bank and asked

¹⁷⁸ Mulvey: 18.

where the circus was.¹⁷⁹ In Paris, Frida's clothing caught the attention of designer Elsa Schiaparelli who produced a line of clothing called "robe Madame Rivera."¹⁸⁰

Although Frida thrived on all the attention her clothing brought her it was not the reason she had chosen to wear the costumes. She had not intentionally tried to identify with any specific myth about Indians in Mexico. The Tehuantepec women of Oaxaca are known for being elegant, beautiful, intelligent, brave and strong. According to legend, theirs is a matriarchal society where women run the markets, handle fiscal matters and dominate the men. Author Hayden Herrera states that the "association with these characteristics would not have displeased Frida Kahlo - it probably would have amused her - her selection of the Tehuana costume simply because it was pretty and festive would be more in character."¹⁸¹ In fact, Frida herself stated that she wore the costume out of the art of flirting. The long skirts covered her injured leg and foot.

Frida used her clothing as means of communicating her views. Before she married Diego Rivera she often wore men's clothing. This was partly to hide her leg and also to identify herself as an independent

¹⁷⁹ Levy, Julian. *Memoir of an Art Gallery*. New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1977: 16.; Herrera, Hayden. "Portrait of Frida Kahlo as a Tehuana." *Heresies*. Winter 1978: 57.

¹⁸⁰ Breslow, Nancy. "Frida Kahlo: A Cry of Joy and Pain" *Americas*. V32,n3. March 1980: 38.

woman.¹⁸² The Tehuana costume, however, identified Frida with her ethnic heritage. Frida was active in the movement of artists and intellectuals in post-revolutionary Mexico that was bringing attention to things native. The passion for “Mexicanismo”, that which was distinctly Mexican, celebrated primitivism of style and subject matter in the arts. This impulse has been seen as a leftist, anti-colonialist political statement. Nonetheless, by choosing the Tehuana costume Frida “was to embody a powerful icon of cultural identity.”¹⁸³

The new belief in nativism led to an ardent exploration of the popular arts, including regional costumes. Frida’s selection of the attire inspired other influential women and eventually sophisticated urban women began wearing native costumes for their everyday attire. For example, Anna Pavlova wore a native costume when dancing a Mexican ballet in Mexico City. Likewise, Rosa Rolando, a friend of Frida and Diego’s, “managed to look more Tehuana than the Tehuanas by braiding her hair and wearing the Tehuana garb.”¹⁸⁴ Miguel Covarrubias, Rosa’s husband, also spread the popularity of the native look. A writer, painter and cartoonist for *Vanity Fair*

¹⁸¹ Herrera. *Heresies*. 1978: 57.

¹⁸² Kettenmann: 26.

¹⁸³ Baddeley, Oriana. “Her Dress Hangs Here: De-frocking the Kahlo Cult” *Oxford Art Journal*. V14In1, 1991: 12.

¹⁸⁴ Herrera. *Heresies*. 1978: 58.

he wrote about the Tehuana women in his book *Mexico South*, published in 1946.¹⁸⁵

In the 1940s, the attraction to nativism, often referred to as the ‘cult of Indianism,’ expanded to bohemian groups in the United States. This reflected the prevalent thought that since World War I, Mexican cultural nationalism had been strengthened by what was viewed as the failure of European civilization. Author Michael Newman points to Spengler’s *Decline of the West* as an instrumental influence, as well as Europeans like D.H. Lawrence who saw Mexico as a “culture of great depth in the sense of nearness to the earth. . .determined by a primordial life. . .the original heaviness of earth.”¹⁸⁶ Herrera takes this argument further when she suggests that for both Frida and urban women in all parts of the world, dressing in native costumes was inspired by the “notion that the peasant is more earth-bound and therefore more deeply sensual than the urban sophisticate.”¹⁸⁷ This attire encouraged women to feel free about their bodies, unlike the tailored clothes that bound them in fashions derivative of men’s fashions. Likewise, men preferred women who dressed in native styles. This too points to the notion of clothing being related to the concept of the natural, sexual peasant and therefore views the female as nature rather

¹⁸⁵ Ibid.: 58.

¹⁸⁶ Newman, Michael. “The Ribbon Around the Bomb.” *Art in America*. April 1983: 165.

than culture. Thus, women identified themselves with their sexual nature when they donned the native costumes.¹⁸⁸

As in many aspects in her life, Frida's actions were in reflection to those of her husband Diego. It was not until after their wedding that she began wearing the Tehuana costume. She chose to dress in this fashion partially to please Diego as much as to please herself. In discussing her painting *The Two Fridas* (1939), Frida explains that the one wearing the Tehuana costume was the one that Diego loved. The Frida wearing a white European style dress was the one that Diego no longer loved. Likewise, the painting *Self Portrait with Cropped Hair* (1940), suggests that Frida wore the costume to please Diego. In this painting she sits wearing a man's suite. She has cut off her long hair, the strands of which are visible in the space around her. By cutting off her hair and trading her native costume for that of a man's suite Frida had abandoned the characteristics of feminine sexuality.

Frida's native look has enhanced the popularity of her image as an Indigenous princess or goddess. Diego delighted in the publicity that Frida's appearance attracted. Diego was quick to espouse his views of Frida's clothing, even making them into a political issue. He once commented to a *Time* magazine reporter:

¹⁸⁷ Herrera. *Heresies*. 1978:58.

¹⁸⁸ *Ibid.*: 58.

The classic Mexican dress has been created by people for people. The Mexican women who do not wear it do not belong to the people, but are mentally and emotionally dependent on a foreign class to which they wish to belong, i.e., the great American and French bureaucracy.¹⁸⁹

By wearing the Tehuana costume Frida facilitated in the creation of her own myth. Herrera points to the possibility that the packaging created by the costume was an attempt to conceal her damaged body and at the same time to make up for her insufficiency.¹⁹⁰ Perhaps the costume made Frida feel more visible, more concrete, rather than a frail, broken, and bedridden woman who could not bare children.

With the recent upsurge in popularity of Frida's image the fashion industry has begun to portray her once again as an exotic symbol to denote Latin American culture. Frida's painting, *Self Portrait as a Tehuana*, was used for advertising the exhibit *Art in Latin America* at the Hayward Gallery in London during the summer of 1989. This self-portrait is of Frida in a Tehuana wedding dress with Diego's image on her forehead as the third eye. Frida's image was used by the exhibit as a means of 'seducing' the audience. Author Joan Borsa states that Frida's image has been asked to portray more than it really embodies.¹⁹¹

¹⁸⁹ "Fashion Notes" *Time*. May 3, 1938.

¹⁹⁰ Herrera. *Heresies*. 1978: 58.

¹⁹¹ Borsa, Joan. "Frida Kahlo: Marginalization and the Critical Female Subject." *Third Text*. [London] n12, August 1990: 28.

Coinciding with the exhibit the fashion magazine *Elle* featured a section on the life and art of Frida in its May 1989 issue. This article spotlighted Frida as the ‘spirit of Mexico.’¹⁹² Although the article is presented as an original work by the magazine’s staff, it appears to be taken straight from Frida’s biography by Hayden Herrera.

Elle magazine’s portrayal of Frida has combined her image of tragic heroine with that of a sensual heroine. Along with passages that discuss her tragic life story appear models dressed in ‘Frida’ style clothing. The young pouty models seem to make suffering appear sexual, romanticizing the “Frida look of pain, the Frida look of virtue and the Frida look of Mexican peasant.”¹⁹³ The article depicts Frida as a symbol of Mexico, of sun-drenched Mexico, an earth mother or earth goddess figure, who was able to remain beautiful, exotic, and sensual in spite of tremendous physical and marital sufferings.¹⁹⁴

The magazine *Vogue* was quick to follow the example set by *Elle*. In February 1990, *Vogue* printed an article exhibiting ‘Frida-esque’ clothing. In the *Vogue* article models seem to flirt with the fact that Frida wore the clothing to hide her injured body, while they flaunt a healthy unbroken figure. Author Oriana Baddeley stated “there is a poignant irony in the way

¹⁹² Baddeley. 1991: 10.

¹⁹³ Borsa, 1990: 29.

¹⁹⁴ Ibid.: 28-29.

clothing, which on one level served to hide Frida's broken body, falls or is lifted by the model to reveal a luxuriantly perfect physique."¹⁹⁵

In both articles Frida's image has been used to represent a broad conception of Mexico itself, one of "exotic, passionate, yet constantly struggling against pain and deceit."¹⁹⁶

Additional interest from the fashion industry has produced a fashion show in Perth, Australia in 1990.¹⁹⁷ This also coincided with an exhibit of Frida's work at the Art Gallery of South Australia in Adelaide.¹⁹⁸ Thus the fashion industry has epitomized Frida as the stereotypical image of Mexico.

¹⁹⁵ Baddeley. 1991: 12.

¹⁹⁶ Ibid.: 12.

¹⁹⁷ Herrera. *New York Times*.

¹⁹⁸ *The Art of Frida Kahlo*. Essays by Teresa del Conde and Charles Merewether. Adelaide: Art Gallery of South Australia, 1990.

ICON OF STRENGTH FOR THE HOMOSEXUAL COMMUNITY

While the pop singer Madonna became a symbol of sexual revolution in the 1980s, Frida likewise became a symbol of sexual freedom. Both Madonna and Frida challenged social standards of acceptable sexual behavior. Both masqueraded in costumes to enhance their sexuality. Both exploited cultural signs and rearranged religious iconography to “constitute identities so insistently fluid that they refuse a singular, essential self.”¹⁹⁹ Ultimately, both became symbols of strength for young women as well as for those in the homosexual community.

Frida Kahlo had already been identified as a symbol among the gay and lesbian community in Mexico during her life and subsequently in the United States after her death. Frida was liberated from the customary sexual mores of her parents’ class and generation and had an open-minded

¹⁹⁹ Bergman-Carton. *Art in America*: 36

approach toward sex. She had 'come of age' in the 1920s. The freer sexual liberalism of the time was readily accepted by her. Like many women of the time, Frida grasped the concept that sexual freedom meant more than the permission to take lovers. This new found freedom also meant that it was now acceptable to enjoy her sexuality without regret or penitence. Rivera's affairs with other women had bothered her. However, she also pursued sexual liaisons with men as well as women²⁰⁰

Frida had been known as a close friend of homosexuals, the object of the worst-feared stigma during the first half of the twentieth century. Perhaps due to the upheaval caused by the Revolution, homosexuals began moving more into the attention of society. Previously they had been accepted only in the realm of 'romantic radicalism.' Frida became a symbol for the homosexual community due to her public views on sex. Three of the most prominent poets in Mexico wrote poems to her and discussed their attachment to her. They were Salvador Novo, Xavier Villaurrutia, and Carlos Pellicer. According to author Hayden Herrera, gay artists and poets were the first to acknowledge Frida's uniqueness. The most free-spoken of the poets was Salvador Novo. He was also a personal and political enemy of Rivera. Novo spoke of Frida as "a rocket, as grenade, as shattered glass, as tidings, as a telegraph in blood." In comparison Pellicer wrote: "You, like a

²⁰⁰ Lowe: 22.

trampled garden on a skyless night. You, like a storm-beaten window; you, like a blood-soaked handkerchief; you, like a butterfly full of tears; like a prematurely broken day; like a tear on a sea of tears; singing and victorious araucaria: a bean of light for everybody.”²⁰¹

Pellicer’s phrase “you, like a storm-beaten window...” Herrera claims summarizes Frida’s life, with numerous operations, constant torture, and the contrast between her frail existence and her strong being. Although Frida largely painted self-portraits she relied heavily upon her friendships as a means of alleviating pain. Thus, to Frida friendships were irreplaceable. Friends offered strength and caring. Her home in Coyoacán was a constant gathering for visitors, friends, and disciples. Frida hid her suffering and greeted her guests with a great deal of compassion and warmth. By concerning herself in her friends well being she was able to distance herself from her own pain.²⁰²

Frida’s assorted sexual relationships, with both male and female lovers, symbolized more than a mere physical attraction. Her liaisons were attempts at developing friendships. Constantly and almost insanely in love with Diego Rivera, Frida regarded all her other relationships as fleeting fancies that roused her hunger to live and love as well as to be loved. With Frida’s fascination with personalities who are famous and beautiful it is no

²⁰¹ Quoted in Billeter. *The World of Frida Kahlo*: 189.

surprise that two of her notable lesbian romances were with two of the celebrated mythical figures of Mexican cinema: Dolores del Rio and Maria Felix. These women's "perfect combination of features and demeanor, of personality and attire"²⁰³ attracted them to Frida.

Frida claimed that her induction with homosexual sex was by being seduced by a school teacher while in her last year at the National Preparatory School. The event turned into a scandal when her parents found out.²⁰⁴ After she entered Rivera's nonconformist bohemian world, where bisexual affairs were common and accepted, she entered into occasional lesbian liaisons. In this environment men had their *casa chica* while women had each other. Frida, therefore, felt no shame about her sexuality.²⁰⁵ Her numerous affairs were partly in response to Rivera's constant philandering, and partly because she was a woman "who loved too much."²⁰⁶ Rivera, however, accepted Frida's lesbian affairs, most likely because he did not feel threatened with them as he did with her affairs with men. In fact, Rivera actually encouraged Frida's homosexual affairs. Rivera joked about Frida flirting with Georgia O'Keeffe in front of George Stieglitz. Some say Rivera encouraged these liaisons because he knew that as an older man he could not, or did not want

²⁰² Ibid.: 189.

²⁰³ Ibid.: 188-189.

²⁰⁴ Herrera, *Frida*: 43.

²⁰⁵ Ibid.: 197-8.

²⁰⁶ Bergman-Carton. *Art in America*: 36.

to, satisfy his much younger wife. Others say he wanted to keep her occupied so that he could be free.²⁰⁷ Jean van Heijenoort, a friend of Diego and Frida, speculates that “he considered Frida’s lesbian affairs a sort of safety valve.” He adds:

Frida did not tell me if Diego fulfilled her sexually. She talked about their relationship, but not about that. But there is no question that she had very strong sexual needs. Once she told me that her view of life as ‘Make love, take a bath, make love again.’ It was in her nature.²⁰⁸

Friends of Frida also talked about her bisexuality: “Frida had many girl friends and lesbian friends. Her lesbianism did not make her masculine. She was a kind of ephebe, boyish and emphatically feminine at the same time.”²⁰⁹

Near the end of her life Frida remained in the company of women more and more, her most intense friendships were with women. It is to filmmaker, Paul Leduc’s credit, that “he did not evade the issue of Frida’s lesbianism, depicting with both passion and humor the love that developed between Frida and her nurse toward the end of Frida’s life.”²¹⁰ Bisexual

²⁰⁷ Herrera. *Frida*.: 198-9.; Also see: Robinson, Roxana. *Georgia O’Keeffe*. New York: Harper Perennial, 1989: 510.

²⁰⁸ Ibid.: 199.

²⁰⁹ Ibid.: 198.

²¹⁰ Behar: 1046.

during much of her life and a lesbian in her last years, Frida was unfaithful to her husband with the same frequency he evidently was to her.²¹¹

Frida's lesbianism appears in her paintings as well. However, unlike the rest of her intimate life her sexual mores are more subtly portrayed. It is generally believed that the two women who appear in *Two Nudes in a Forest* (1939), and earlier in *What the Water Gave Me* (1938) are reminiscent of Frida and a woman she loved.²¹² She has arranged the two figures in a setting that is outside the domain of time, space, and custom. They appear next to a succulent jungle where a spider monkey watches over them. The monkey, a symbol of lust, coils his tail in the same fashion as the twisting branches. On the other side of the couple roots protrude from the ground. Surrounded by this hostile topography the women stay close to one another. One of the women is suggestive of a guardian figure. As an Indian Madonna she wears a red shawl. This painting belongs to the actress Dolores del Rio, who states that "the indigenous nude is solacing the white nude. The dark one is stronger."²¹³ The red shawl drips blood that falls to the earth. This symbolizes the suffering of the woman or of her people.

Both homosexual and heterosexual, Frida's strong sexual desire asserted itself in a distinct style that illuminates from all her paintings. It

²¹¹ Zamora: 8.

²¹² Herrera. *Frida*: 198.; Herrera, Hayden. *Frida Kahlo: The Paintings*. New York: Harper Collins Publishers, 1991: 127.

saturates the more organic of her still lifes, and is the predominate subject of paintings such as *Flower of Life* (1944), and *Sun and Life* (1947). Friends have noted that Frida's most fervent love affair was with herself. There is a strong suggestion of self-glorifying auto-eroticism in her display of her scars in paintings. This is seen in paintings such as *Remembrance of an Open Wound*, as well as in later self-portraits that exhibit her wounds.²¹⁴

Frida's self-images, while admitting, even boasting the 'wound' which becomes a metaphor for castration, seem inspired by what is termed 'self-regard.' Indeed *The Two Fridas* and other paintings indicate an auto-eroticism that, following Freud, might link to her homosexuality.

It is through this portrayal of herself *for herself* that she is able to begin to re-map the female body within representation: The body becomes a bearer of signs, some legible, some esoteric... This discourse of the body is itself inscribed within a kind of codex of nature and cosmos, in which sun and moon, plant and animal, are pictograms. At the same time this pictographic effect de-eroticizes the imagery.²¹⁵

It is no wonder that the homosexual community has practically cultized Frida. Her refusal to conform to sexual norms was well publicized in her paintings as well as by her friends and people who knew her. She revealed the strength behind the bond that two lovers of the same sex can share and compared it to the pain she felt from her heterosexual relationship

²¹³ Ibid.: 198-9.

²¹⁴ Ibid.: 199.

²¹⁵ Newman: 168-9.

with her philandering husband. In recent times the homosexual community has taken Frida's image to be one of their own. This was seen at the "Pasion por Frida" play at the Mexican Museum in San Francisco when many of those auditioning for parts in the play were 'Friditas' or cross-dressing artists.²¹⁶

²¹⁶ Tully: 126-33.

ICON OF WOMANHOOD

The greatest contribution to the Frida Kahlo cult enacted from the women's movement and feminist writers of the 1970s. These writers were responsible for bringing female artists into the art history books. Their goals were to write female artists into art history, where they had previously been ignored, and to identify those characteristics in the art of women that could illustrate a "female sensibility."²¹⁷

Imagery in Frida's work of childbirth, miscarriage, and the violence of domestic life were viewed as symbolizing the female experience. Frida's art reflected a deeply personal view of a woman. Authors have stated that she was the first artist to depart from the male principle of art and create her

²¹⁷ Garber, Elizabeth. "Art Critics on Frida Kahlo: A Comparison of Feminist and Non-Feminist Voices" *Arts Education*. V45n2, March 1, 1992: 43.

own iconography.²¹⁸ Regarding Frida's art Rivera stated: "Frida is the only example in the history of art of an artist who tore open her chest and heart to reveal the biological truth of her feelings."²¹⁹ Representation of gender-based experiences was important to the women's movement in order to match the transformation of women's lives, from personal to political. The women's movement was caught up in conscious-raising awareness of personal experiences, which eventually coined the phrase "the personal is political."²²⁰ By placing women's experiences in a political context women began to understand these experiences in comparison to the patriarchal structures of their society. In addition to this, female artists began depicting the female body in a mode of substantiating their experiences. This, of course, led to the introduction of women's representations of the female body in art, which in turn led to the concept of a universal language of womanhood. "On its most problematic level this implied that certain biological essences or characteristics were inherent to all women, thus

²¹⁸ Billeter. *The World of Frida Kahlo*: 10.; Valensquez, Kenia. "Frida Kahlo-Why this Mexican Painter is one of the Hottest Tickets in the Art World" *Twin Plant*. V91n1, August 1, 1993: 41; Valensquez stated "her paintings have been described as some of the most disturbing, passionate, exotic and powerful in the world. In the past few years, Frida Kahlo's name has become synonymous with feminism, enigmatic art and survival of the human spirit." ; Behar. *American Hispanic Review*.: 1045.

²¹⁹ Rivera, Diego. "Frida Kahlo and Mexican Art." *Catalogue of the Frida Kahlo Museum*. Editions Miguel Galas S.A. Mexico, 1970: 10.

²²⁰ For a discussion of Kahlo and the term "the personal is political", see: Motian-Meadows, Mary. *Frida Kahlo: The Personal and Political*. MA Thesis. Fullerton: California State University, 1982.

ignoring social, racial, and environmental differences.”²²¹ In the sense of the women’s movement the term “universal” referred to a universal image of “oppressed woman” as opposed to the image of “white middle class male.”²²² Frida’s images have been conceived of as representing biological situations, that women similarly encounter. Thus, Frida was placed in this universal form by feminist historians who emphasized her personal biography.²²³

Unlike art painted by men, Frida’s nudes do not allow a voyeuristic stare. Instead, her nudes are a “constant challenge, irreverent toward the values of the dominant ideology,” in which “her vision of life and death [is filled] with blood.”²²⁴ In the art world, as well as in society, there is an unspoken taboo against portraying female blood especially menstrual blood. Considered a curse of menses, blood signifies “filth and pollution, defilement and degradation.”²²⁵ Because Frida disregards these taboos, her paintings are non-traditional and even shocking. Opposing depictions of the

²²¹ Melnychuk, Sue. *Confirming claims and investigating identities: Frida Kahlo and American feminism in the late 1970s*. MA Thesis. Canada: University of British Columbia, 1992: 19.; Also see: French, Joanna and Cassandra Lager, and Arlene Raven. *Feminist Art Criticism*. Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1988: 89; Gouma-Peterson, Thalia and Patricia Matthews “The Feminist Critique of Art History” *Art Bulletin*. Vol.LXIX, no.3, 1987: 348-51.

²²² Melnychuk.: 20; refers to the understanding of Kahlo’s images as universal being re-represented in a code that was specifically formulated to meet the concerns of women in the United States rather than women on an international level.

²²³ Numerous authors have described Kahlo’s work as universal: Melnychuk.; Frazier: 51.

²²⁴ Bakewell: 174.

disfigured male, where blood and guts are a sign of sacrifice, as seen in the blood of Christ and the 'guts' of the war hero, the mutilated female symbolizes complete violation and, therefore, indicates a rupture in the social order. This has been said to be exactly what Frida's nudes endeavor to signify. They challenge and make known the long-standing sexual contradictions where men's blood is sacred, as in the blood of Christ or gallant as in the blood of the war victim. Women's blood, on the other hand is perceived as irreverent and evidence of a violation. Feminist writers saw Frida's exposure of her blood is a symbol of liberation. They saw in her paintings an opportunity for the "long-suffering Mexican woman to come out of her culturally constructed silence and express herself and, in the expression of herself, gain subject status."²²⁶

Several of her works evoke early Christian martyrology, many of which she places herself in appearance of a lay saint or goddess. She portrays herself surrounded by her attributes, however, rather than wearing a crown of thorns she wears a necklace of thorns.²²⁷ Frida often went to church not for religious purposes, but to visit "the sadistic Christ." This was representations of the suffering Christ depicted in the delight of the gory

²²⁵ Lowe: 85.; Orenstein: 7.

²²⁶ Bakewell: 174.

²²⁷ *The Art of Frida Kahlo*. Adelaide: 8.

extremity of his wounds.²²⁸ Scenes of suffering, especially on a religious base, are common in Latin American art where the artist wants to evoke an emotional response from their viewer.

In her paintings, Frida does not question the assumption that the Mexican earth is female,

but her earth-woman is one whose identity rests not on a presupposed virginity, the repudiation of some violators, or the denial of her sexuality through the veneration of her passivity.²²⁹

In her paintings Frida converts the inactive earth into a living, 'sexualized' woman, by concentrating on her own physical experiences. In this manner Frida "grants subject status not only to the preconceived earth-mother and Indian-mother, but to her children, the Mexican mestiza and mestizo."²³⁰

Frida's paintings that most aptly apply to the feminist view of her as the universal woman belong to the series she painted depicting episodes in her life. This includes the paintings *Henry Ford Hospital*, *My Birth*, and among others *A Few Small Nips*. These paintings are done in the ex-voto or retablo style that Rivera suggested Kahlo use for its apparent symbolic purposes. The ex-voto style commonly portrays a supernatural event, blending fact and fantasy, depicting an image of divine intervention to memorialize the miraculous recovery from a sickness or an accident. An ex-

²²⁸ Richmond: 17.

²²⁹ Bakewell: 178.

voto portrays two demonstrations of reality: the earthly - an incident documented with journalistic authenticity; and the divine - in the form of a patron saint shown floating above the victim.²³¹ Typical of ex-voto paintings is a space at the bottom of the painting where a description of the event is written.²³²

In the painting, *Henry Ford Hospital*, Frida depicts a miscarriage.²³³ Frida's image appears in a pool of blood, the white sheet contrasting the death of the fetus and a womb swollen with a pregnancy that no longer exists. Floating objects appear, including an orchid and a small fetus that resembles Diego Rivera, "all symbols of a truncated motherhood."²³⁴ Many authors have commented on the fact that Frida desired to bear a child by Rivera. As an adolescent she bragged to her friends that she would someday have his child. In the context of Mexican social codes where having children and being a mother are essential aspects of femininity and define womanhood, Frida's despair of being barren is understood more aptly.²³⁵ In an interview Frida stated: "We couldn't have a child, and I cried

²³⁰ Ibid.: 178.

²³¹ Lowe:45-7.

²³² Breslow. *Armericas*: 35.

²³³ Lowe: 67; Lowe states that Kahlo depicted the "bewildering emotions and sensations of her month-long ordeal of miscarriage" in this painting.

²³⁴ Agosin, Margorie. *Women of Smoke*. Translated by Janice Molloy. New Jersey: The Red Sea Press, 1989: 82.

²³⁵ Lowe: 65.

inconsolably.”²³⁶ To make up for her inability to bare children Frida threw herself into her art and her friendships. Regarding the painting *Henry Ford Hospital* Frida said: “My painting carries within it the message of pain. I lost three children... paintings substitute for all this. I believe work is the best thing.”²³⁷

Frida’s second painting depicting a miscarriage is *My Birth*. In this painting Frida appears giving birth to herself, but what is born is a dead infant, which is actually the adult head of Frida herself. Thus, the picture shows Frida’s view of her own birth while pointing out the miscarriage she recently suffered. At the same time Frida also refers to the death of her mother by covering the head of the mother in the painting.²³⁸ Although it is painted in the ex-voto style and Frida paints a section for the written explanation of the event she leaves this space blank. Also rather than a guardian overseeing the event Frida places a picture of the Mother of Sorrows on the wall above the head board of the bed. Frida stated that “the Madonna was included not for religious reasons, but as a ‘memory image,’ because a similar retablo was present when she was born.”²³⁹ The image of the Virgin is not the typical one, instead Frida displays the Virgin with daggers piercing her neck. This use of iconography refers to a Mexican

²³⁶ Zamora.,: 40.

²³⁷ Drucker: 69.

²³⁸ Kettenmannn: 38.

tradition of depicting the Virgin without Christ, which is to warn believers to “guard against sorrow, or pain, or at the hour of death.”²⁴⁰ Concerning this painting Rivera stated: “A birth that produced the only woman able to present in her art the feelings, responsibilities, and creative possibilities of women with unsurpassable physical commitment.”²⁴¹

The painting *A Few Small Nips*, portrays the gruesome depiction of a murder, in which Frida likewise represents her emotions mutilated by her husband’s affair with her sister. The horrific realism of the piece reflects Mexican artists fascination with exaggerated depictions of blood. In adopting this style of expression Frida reflects upon the popular work of Mexican artist José Guadalupe Posada, who depicted scenes of grim murders and accidents.²⁴² In addition to Posada’s reproduction Frida was well aware of portrayals of Christ by Mexican sculptors who explicitly rendered the wounds of Christ intensely and precisely in very realistic detail and color.²⁴³ For Frida the mark of blood is woman’s mark. She often depicted women pierced with gash wounds, bleeding after an abortion or childbirth, dropping blood from a vein connected to her heart, or punctured

²³⁹ Lowe.: 47.

²⁴⁰ Ibid.: 47.

²⁴¹ Von Waberer, Keto. Introduction by, *Frida Kahlo: Masterpieces*. New York & London: W.W. Norton, 1994: n.p.

²⁴² Lowe: 85; Billeter, *The World of Frida Kahlo*: 20.

²⁴³ Hughes, Robert. “Onward From Olmec” *Time*. October 15, 1990: 81.

with arrows.²⁴⁴ Frida's depiction of the female nude, the victim, is in defiance with typical scenes of nudes. "The gritty reality of the scene, utterly lacking in any erotic overtones, undermines the conventional presentation of woman's body in art."²⁴⁵ Furthermore, this painting serves as a reminder of the explicit reality of daily violence in women's lives.

Feminist writers were most obviously concerned with exploring and re-defining the previously known ways of viewing work done by a woman. They followed a philosophical inspiration with distinct feminist concerns that grew from the 1970s feminist movement.²⁴⁶ One of the predominant goals was to acquire an effective feminist artistic method that could be applied toward social change. This encouraged many to view the issues of representation as political.²⁴⁷

Feminist art historians challenged assumptions of history, ability and the universality of art. Arlene Raven, a feminist historian and critic, remembers the protests women held due to their exclusions from the Museum of Modern Art and the Whitney Museum. Additionally, they established shared workspaces and art collectives, as well as organizing

²⁴⁴ Lowe: 85.

²⁴⁵ Ibid.: 86.

²⁴⁶ Melnychuk: 3.

²⁴⁷ Ibid.: 3; French.: 87.; Gouma-Peterson.: 325-357.; Raven, Arlene ed. *Crossing Over: Feminism and Art of Social Concern*. Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1988.; Langer, Sandre. "Emerging Feminist Art History" *Art Criticism* V1n2, Winter 1980: 66-83.

feminist publications.²⁴⁸ Together they believed that it was only as a group, or movement, that they would be able to accomplish what they had been denied through history. Their “culture of tears and years of oppression” would now produce a “positive culture which was women-centered, that is contrived for women and by women.”²⁴⁹

Feminist historians viewed the urgent and essential task before them as the recovery of the women lost from history. This meant discovering, documenting and interpreting the art created by women artists. Frida Kahlo was naturally included in this renaissance. Since her death in 1954, Frida had been nearly forgotten. It was then through the feminist writers of the 1970s that her story was ‘re-introduced’ and became known in the United States.²⁵⁰ Frida’s significance for feminists was the ease in which her images could be understood. Her paintings seemed to depict a definite “female point of view.” Frida was so vastly important to feminists writing about art history because she was seen as a true example of a woman who had created symbols to tell her story. This was especially important because her symbols were those that spoke of subjects previously unmentioned in history.²⁵¹ Frida, therefore, became an historic identity. Her representations of female

²⁴⁸ Ibid.: 3; Raven.: 5.

²⁴⁹ Ibid.: 4; Raven.: 5-6.

²⁵⁰ Ibid.: 4; One of the earliest accounts of Kahlo from a feminist perspective was Orenstein’s article, 1973: 7-9; Ten years later Herrera’s biography.

subjects were used to validate the claims feminists had been wanting to make about female representation.

Frida had originally been seen by the feminist movement as a woman from a different culture. They saw Mexican culture as being more oppressive than their own, with its more obvious machismoism.²⁵² Despite the cultural barriers of the time, Frida's art portrays a woman who spoke out and recorded her personal experiences. Frida sought self-awareness through her art during a time and place when society practically prohibited women from seriously following a career.²⁵³ As a result, she became a heroine among feminist artists in the United States in the late 1970s. For feminist writers, who desired to re-write art history, Frida symbolized the discovery of a 'natural' feminist, one who remarkably validated the feminist politics that were so important at the moment.²⁵⁴

Feminist historians of the 1970s were celebrating a 'politic of life.' This politic recognized and strengthened liberalism as an absolute belief. "Reinterpreting Frida as performing this liberal politic was a source of

²⁵¹ Goldman, Shifra M. "Six Women Artists of Mexico" *Women's Art Journal* V3n2, Fall 1982/Winter 1983: 2.

²⁵² Ibid:2.

²⁵³ Herrera. "Frida Kahlo: Her Life, Her Art" *Art Forum*: 39.

²⁵⁴ Melnychuk: 27.

inspiration and relief for women. She represented a potential savior who confirmed self and society.”²⁵⁵

In the late 1930s Frida was named a Surrealist by Andre Breton. This classification followed her into the writings of feminist historians. Albeit, feminism surrealism have little in common. It is only in the context of Frida Kahlo that they cross.²⁵⁶ It is ironic that Frida functions as a symbol for both the surrealist and feminist movements. “In surrealism, woman is muse, femme-enfant, embodiment of amour fou, object of desire, and ultimately man’s mediator with the unconscious.”²⁵⁷ Surrealism’s fascination with the darker side of the human psyche resided well with some of Frida’s most painful images.²⁵⁸ Feminists, conversely perceived Frida’s recreation of herself with the “costuming and re-defining of her body as a rejection of society, sexuality, conformity, roles and rules.”²⁵⁹

There was one aspect in which both surrealists and feminists agreed. That was in focusing on Frida’s efforts to express how social controls could be challenged or defied. Feminists saw Frida’s re-creating herself as a means

²⁵⁵ Ibid.: 27.

²⁵⁶ Ibid.: 30.

²⁵⁷ Ibid.: 31; For further discussion Melnychuk refers to: Raaberg, Gwen. “The Problematics of Women and Surrealism” in *Surrealism and Women*. Ed. Mary Ann Caws, et al. Cambridge: MIT Press, 1991: 2.

²⁵⁸ Breslow.: 36.

²⁵⁹ Melnychuk: 31-32.

of relating to the “physical and historical circumstances that she experienced as a woman.”²⁶⁰

Positioning Frida in the surrealist canon was essential for the feminists because it aided their claims of Frida’s self-representation. They were not interested in Mexican history or politics, but in the history between Frida and the surrealist movement and specifically with women’s self-representation in the modernist artistic traditions. More specifically, they were interested in Frida’s capability to portray herself and her body. It was this re-fashioning of the body through which Frida became a symbol of modernist self-representation. Thus, it became essential to understand the relationship the surrealists claimed with Frida in order to revise the history of art according to the feminist movements political desires.²⁶¹

Through the feminist movements retelling of Frida’s life story an interest in the artist grew in a new generation of feminists. Frida’s name and image has been included in listings of feminist heroines. For example, in the 1995 movie *The Great Mom Swap* Frida’s picture is shown along with that of other famous women on a wall which is referred to as containing pictures of influential women. Author Hayden Herrera noted that the teen magazine *Sassy* has placed Frida in a list of twenty women of this century for

²⁶⁰ Ibid.: 31-32.

²⁶¹ Ibid.: 42.

American girls to look up to.²⁶² Most recently her name was included on a T-shirt along with names such as Eleanor Roosevelt, Amelia Earhart, Virginia Woolf and Princess Diana. This image appeared on the cover of *The New York Times Magazine* and was used to illustrate an article on heroine worship “inventing an identity in the age of female icons.”²⁶³

²⁶² Herrera. *New York Times*.:41.

²⁶³ *New York Times Magazine*. November 24, 1996: section 6.

ICON OF COMMERCIALIZATION

Frida's image has been reproduced numerous times and has become a symbol on its own. The reproduction of her image owes its creation in part to international relations between Mexico and the United States.

Traditionally art critics judged Mexican and Latin American art as 'second class' because it did not fit into the European standards of exotic art.

However, there have been several periods during this century when the United States looked toward Mexico for inspiration and even saw Mexican art as a valuable commodity.²⁶⁴

During the 1930s Mexican muralists acquired commissions in the United States. The U.S. government had viewed the Mexican muralist movement as an example constructively employing artists during the Great

²⁶⁴ Nelson, H.H. Granburn ed. *Ethnic and Tourist Arts: Cultural Expressions From the Fourth World*. Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 1976.; Also see: Cockroft, Eva. "Abstract Expressionism, Weapon of the Cold War" *Artforum*. V12n10, June 1974.

Depression. Following this example major capitalists such as Edsel Ford and Nelson Rockefeller gave commissions to Mexican artists.²⁶⁵ Frida Kahlo made her first trip to the United States when Diego Rivera was given commissions in San Francisco, Detroit, and New York, from both Ford and Rockefeller. During his second commission in San Francisco, Diego and Frida were remarried.²⁶⁶ The influenced Mexican artists generated in the United States is evident in the fact that starting in 1935, the Museum of Modern Art began collecting Latin American artwork.²⁶⁷ Furthermore, art galleries began exhibiting work by Latin American artists. It was during this time that Frida had her first exhibit in the United States, at New York's Julien Levy Gallery from November 1-15, 1938.²⁶⁸

Group exhibits of Latin American artists became popular during the 1940s. The government became involved as part of the "Good Neighbor" policy. Along with the Pan-American Union, President Roosevelt hosted the exhibit "Twenty Centuries of Mexican Art" at the Museum of Modern Art in

²⁶⁵ Goldman, Shifra M. "Rewriting the History of Mexican Art: The Policies and Economics of Contemporary Culture" in *Mexico: A Country in Crisis*. ed Jerry Ladman. El Paso: University of Texas Press, 1986: 97-8.

²⁶⁶ "Mr. & Mrs. Rivera Again" *Art Digest*. December 15, 1940: 8.

²⁶⁷ "The Modern Implements Good Neighbor Policy" *Art Digest*. April 15, 1943: 9.

²⁶⁸ "Bomb Beribboned" *Time*. November 14, 1938: 29.; Wolfe, Bertram D. "Rise of another Rivera" *Vogue*. November 1, 1938: 64.; Pach, Walter. "Frida Rivera: Gifted Canvases by an Unselfconscious Surrealist." *Art News*. V37. November 1938: 13.; Levy, Julien. *Memoir of an Art Gallery*. New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1977.

1940.²⁶⁹ Besides this exhibit Frida took part in numerous other exhibits in the early 1940s. Included were the exhibits “Golden Gate International Exposition” in San Francisco; “Modern Mexican Painters” at the Institute of Contemporary Arts in Boston; “Portraits of the Twentieth Century” at the Museum of Modern Art; “Mexican Art Today” at the Philadelphia Museum of Art; and “Women Artists” at Peggy Guggenheim’s Art of This Century Gallery in New York.²⁷⁰

Nearly twenty years later the United States found itself in the aftermath of the Cuban Revolution, the Bay of Pigs, and the 1962 missile crisis. In this atmosphere of Cold War politics, Latin American art took on a new role in international politics, one that tried to repair past injustices. It was under this environment that the Los Angeles County Museum of Art exhibited “Master Works of Mexican Art.” Frida Kahlo, having died nearly ten years earlier and nearly forgotten in the United States, was not included in this exhibit. Mexico, however, at the same time was beginning its own campaign of commercializing its artists. To coincide with the 1968 Olympics, held in Mexico City, Juan O’Gorman along with the Organizing

²⁶⁹ “Mexico’s Art Through Twenty Centuries Installed in Modern Museum” *Art Digest*. June 1, 1940: 15, 34.

²⁷⁰ Goldman, Shifra M. *Contemporary Mexican Painting in a Time of Change*. Austin: University of Texas Press, 1977: 29-35.; Grafly, Dorothy. “Deeply National Art of Old Mexico Presented in Philadelphia” *Art Digest*. April 15, 1943: 8.; *Latin American Spirit: Art and Artists in the United States, 1920-1970*. New York: The Bronx Museum of the Arts in Association with Harry N. Abrams, Inc., Publishers, 1989.

Committee of the Games of the XIX Olympiad published a new catalog for the Frida Kahlo Museum.²⁷¹

The 1970s saw along with the feminist movement and the First International Women's Conference, the rise of the Chicano movement along with economic and political issues. The Women's Conference, held in Mexico City, inspired exhibits of Mexican women artists.²⁷² Political and economic interests produced the *Mexico Today* Symposium held in the United States during 1978. The symposium consisted of seminars, films, exhibits, performing arts and courses on contemporary Mexico.²⁷³

The symposium coincided with negotiations between the United States and Mexico regarding the export of petroleum and natural gas. As cultural efforts toward the hope of situating Mexico as the leader of the Third World nations, Mexican President Echeverria arranged for a touring exhibit entitled "Treasures of Mexico" to accompany the Mexico Today Symposium. Economic interests in Mexico were tied to this exhibit in the fact that it was brought to the United States by the Armand Hammer

²⁷¹ *The Frida Kahlo Museum*. Catalog. Mexico City: Organizing Committee of the Games of the XIX Olympiad, 1968.

²⁷² Goldman. "Six Women Artists in Mexico" *Women's Art Journal*: 1.

²⁷³ Barta, Roger. "Mexico Oficio: The Miseries and Splendors of Culture" translated by Coco Fusco. *Third Text*. n14, Spring 1991: 7-15.; Goldman, Shifra M. "Latin Visions and Revisions" *Art in America*. V76n5, May 1988, discusses "Art of the Fantastic" exhibit 1920-1987, Indianapolis Museum of Art, 1987.; Wallis, Brian. "Selling Nations" *Art in America* V79n9, September 1991: 85-91.; Willson, William. "Mexico 'Treasures': A Panoramic Southern Exposure" *Los Angeles Times*. August

Foundation, along with the cooperation of the Secretary of Foreign Affairs for the Mexican government, Santiago Roel. Furthermore, the CEO for the Occidental Petroleum Oil Corporation owned the only two private galleries where the exhibit was shown.²⁷⁴

Additional exhibits of Mexican art boasted several solo exhibits of Frida Kahlo's work. A touring exhibit was also organized by the Chicago Museum of Contemporary Art in January of 1978. This exhibit traveled to six U.S. museums.²⁷⁵ As mentioned in chapter five, the Galeria de la Raza dedicated an exhibit to Frida in honor of the Day of the Dead celebrations.²⁷⁶

The promotion of Latin American art during the 1970s began to show its mark in the art markets. In 1977, Sotheby's launched a sale of Latin American artwork. Sales from many male artists, such as Diego Rivera, Rufino Tamayo, and Francisco Toledo, exceeded their expectations. Frida Kahlo's work entered the market in the spring of 1979, after the touring exhibit. Prices for her work rose from \$40,000 to over \$1 million. Following Sothbey's example, Christie's entered into the Latin American market in

13, 1978.; Ianco-Starrells, Josine. "Art News" *Los Angeles Times*. December 2, 1979.; Jacobs, Jody. "Preview of Mexico's Treasures" *Los Angeles Times*. August 4, 1978.

²⁷⁴ Melnychuk: 10-11. The two galleries listed were: Knoedler and Hammer Galleries in New York.

²⁷⁵ Herrera. *Frida Kahlo*.; The exhibit traveled to: Mandeville Art Gallery, University of California, San Diego : May 17; Phoenix Art Museum, Arizona :June 9-July 23; University of Texas Art Museum at Austin: August 13-October 1; Sarah Campbell Blaffer Gallery, University of Houston: October 14-November 19; Neuberger Museum, State University of New York at Purchase: December 8-January 4, 1979.

²⁷⁶ Kamin: 44.

1982.²⁷⁷ By 1990 Frida Kahlo surpassed everyone's expectations when one of her paintings broke all records for a work of art by a Latin American artist sold by Sotheby's.

Author Shifra Goldman points to the 1980s as a phenomenon of an astounding proliferation of Latin American art exhibits not seen in the United States since the 1940s, a time when the U.S. government sought support from allies among Latin American countries that were being pursued by the Nazis. Goldman further states that since few art historians or critics know Latin American history the plethora of reviews that accompany each exhibit are void of any real analysis or critical evaluation. Therefore, the reviews range from "gushing to stereotyped."²⁷⁸

In the early 1990s, surrounding the NAFTA negotiations Mexico expanded upon its commercialization of "Mexicanness." In the exhibit entitled "Mexico: Splendors of Thirty Centuries" at the Metropolitan Museum, Frida Kahlo became the poster-girl image to represent Mexico. In a rare visit to the United States, Mexican President Carlos Salinas de Gortari inaugurated the exhibit.²⁷⁹ In an advertisement for the exhibit Salinas is quoted as stating:

²⁷⁷ Tully: 130.; Goldman. "Latin American art's US explosion: Looking a gift horse in the mouth" *New Art Examiner*. V17n4, December 1989: 29.; Herrera. *New York Times*.: 41.

²⁷⁸ Goldman. *New Art Examiner*: 25.

²⁷⁹ Tewlow: 30.; Hughes: 80.

Mexico has a culture of its own of which we are all proud. Knowledge of other civilizations enriches us. Sharing humanity's efforts toward peace and progress stimulates in us an awareness of what is Mexican, and of our contributions to the world's cultural legacy.²⁸⁰

This celebration of Mexican culture through art was an attempt to reveal a richer image of Mexico. Besides the involvement of President Salinas, two other powerful and influential men backed the exhibition. They were Emilio Azcàrraga and Octavio Paz. Azcàrraga, who is known as the media *jefe* due to his being principal shareholder in Televisa, was also the principle backer of the exhibit.²⁸¹

Numerous exhibits followed the example of the "Mexico: Splendors" exhibit. Among the exhibits was the Louis Newman Gallery's exhibit "The Unknown Frida: The Woman Behind the Work." This exhibit featured a collection of more than thirty privately owned documents and letters written by Frida, along with some rare photographs.²⁸²

The exhibit "Mexico: Splendors" traveled after its introduction in New York. In 1992, the exhibit was shown in San Antonio. To draw attention advertisers used Frida's self-portraits to represent the exoticism of Mexico. The best example of this was seen in one billboard where her *Self-*

²⁸⁰ Quoted in Goldman, "Metropolitan Splendors: The Buying and Selling of Mexico" *Third Text*. n14. Spring 1991: 19.

²⁸¹ Stevens, Mark. "South of the Border" *Vanity Fair*. October 1991: 156, 162.

portrait with Monkeys (1940) was altered and used as the letter “M” for Mexico.²⁸³ This approach furthered the commercialization of Frida’s face, which had previously been used in poster form for advertisements.

An exhibit in Dallas, Texas, entitled “Mexico Pictorial and Folk Art,” presented the traditions, customs and values of Mexico in the exhibition halls of the Central Civic Park Gallery. This exhibition combined the involvement of Viva Internacional, Adv., with the cooperation of the Embassies of Mexico and the United States. The works exhibited were part of the Cultural Heritage of Pulsar and came from the collections of the companies La Moderna, and Seguros Comercial America. The exhibit breaks new ground in the relations of international exhibits with an Internet web cite that advertises the exhibit along with displays of artwork. Frida’s painting *My Dress Hangs There* is the image used in discussing the exhibition’s contemporary art section. The exhibit has already been displayed in Holland, Canada, and Spain as well as other countries.²⁸⁴

Regarding Frida’s rise to stardom author Rachel Tibol states “she has become a commercialized monster in multicultural America. The ultimate challenge in telling Frida’s story lies in getting past all the commercial hype,

²⁸² MacAdam, Barbara A. “Postcards from the edge” *Art News*. V91n1, January 1992: 16.

²⁸³ Lietz, Margaret Ann. *The Frida Phenomenon: The Constructed Meaning and Commoditization of Frida Kahlo*. M.A. Thesis. Arizona State University, 1993: 76.

as well as the myriad images of herself she left behind.”²⁸⁵ Tibol refers to the emphasis that cultural awareness has called upon Frida’s image. She has been asked to stand in as representation for her country, for ‘la raza.’ With this in mind it is not hard to understand how many in the Mexican art world believe that Frida’s personal life has been stripped of its political and cultural content and elevated in importance over her painting. Mexican critics are at times irritated by the commercialization of Frida and her conversion into a minority icon. However, according to Gregorio Luke, a Mexican specialist on Frida Kahlo who has been lecturing about her all over the country, this commercialization is healthy and even positive. “Symbolism creates interest. She redefines the contemporary Mexican woman. She was modern, liberal, and independent, but she was traditional and nourished by the past.”²⁸⁶

Frida’s image has been stripped of its original meaning, that of her life and experience, and has been replaced with the qualities of a mirror, made fluid enough to reflect whatever qualities are requested of it at any given time or for any event. She has merely been reconstructed into an image meant to represent Mexico. An exotic image that will give a new face to that of Mexico, previously seen as backwards and barbarous.

²⁸⁴ Romo Garza, Alfonso. “Pulsar Internacional” Internet home page: <http://www.infosel.com.mx/mercado/pulsar/pictoric/ingles/presenta.html>

²⁸⁵ Quoted in Sanchez, Elena. “Frida Kahlo” *Hispanic*. July 1, 1993: 26.

The international relations experienced between Mexico and the United States over the past few decades have left a romanticized image of Mexico viewed through the work of Mexican artists. This view was expressed through interests of financiers and businesses on both sides. In this light the growing Latin American influences on mainstream American culture must be understood as one of the discourses that permeate the phenomenon of Frida Kahlo as the poster-girl of Mexico.

²⁸⁶ Ibid. :28.

CONCLUSION:

FRIDA KAHLO AS A CULTURAL ICON

In recent years the memory of Frida Kahlo has sparked a cult following that is based on the image of her as a cultural icon. Frida's image, that of the characteristic eye brows, elaborate hair styles, and Mexican costume, has been used to represent an exotic image of Mexico itself. By donning the Mexican costume of the Tehuantepec women Frida personifies a powerful icon of cultural identity. This image is both exotic and passionate and at the same time full of pain and suffering. It is also the stereotypical image of Mexico, a mixture of poverty, revolution, and paradise.

Frida's popularity is a typical example of most artists who become mythical personalities in the popular imagination. The attraction Frida receives has focused mainly on the vivid and tragic details of her extraordinary life. Responses to her work have been dominated by

reflections on her life, by her passionate obsession with her husband, her flamboyant appearance, and with her physical and emotional pain. Author Oriana Baddeley states that “while Frida’s art helped her to deal with the tragedies of her life, for most audiences it is her life story which allows access to her art.”

Frida’s ability to conquer suffering has inspired those in the medical and psychological professions to look to her as an icon of mental anguish. Her fear of abandonment, her narcissism, Munchausen characteristics, and her constant use of an emotional mask has gained her reference as ‘our lady of sorrow.’

Many have pointed to the 1983 publication of Hayden Herrera’s biography *Frida*, as starting the rise of the Frida Kahlo cult. Since then Frida has been the subject of TV documentaries, films, stage plays, numerous publications and exhibits. Her story has been told and retold, each time re-emphasizing her tremendous pain. She has thus, been fashioned into a tragic heroine, an icon of suffering. The cult following that her fame has produced emphasizes her heroine-like ability, that of being a strong woman capable of surviving.

The romanticism of Frida as an invalid led to her being the model sufferer. Representations in plays, films, musicals, and dances all portray her life as a serious subject matter, one of heroic tragedy.

Traditionally we have looked to icons and heroines for how they have elevated common human experiences and suffering. In a time when mass-mediated images and icons form the essence of our societal awareness, the remembered fragments of a celebrity, such as Frida Kahlo, make up cult objects of our imagined culture. The obsessions with her life and death are a means of exploring where we, as a population, fit into the political landscape, dominated by mass media.

The tragic heroine is looked at for the release of a great deal of pain. In Frida's example she raised the boundaries between life and art. All of Frida's emotions were put into her paintings. Suffering is perceived as a gift to the tragic heroine. If personal pain is the price for her art than she must suffer and learn how to endure it. Frida, therefore, as the tragic heroine, is as vulnerable as she is charismatic. It is her character that enables her to endure.

Through her connection with artists Frida has transcended art into culture. She has come to mean strength and endurance and has been revered

as saint-like. This is exemplified in artist representations where Frida is placed in the guise of the Virgin of Guadalupe.

Each remembering of Frida - each exhibit, each fashion show, book or article - has added to her image, the creation of an icon that stands for exotic Mexico.²⁸⁷ She is viewed as the ultimate Mexican woman - both aristocratic and peasant - and a great success story as a female artist in Mexico, an example for women everywhere. Frida's death at an early age also adds to her image. It breaths life into her and adds to her mystique. Over and over again we look at her paintings, her clothing, the writings in her diary. We continually remake her, recollect her, and resurrect her. Each time she becomes something new, more exotic and mythic, the tragic heroine.

The greatest contribution to the Frida Kahlo cult has been the women's movement of the 1970s. To feminist writers Frida's paintings of childbirth, miscarriage, and domestic violence symbolized the female experience. Through the telling and retelling of Frida's story a new generation of feminists have taken on the Frida worship. Representations of Frida appear in venues of feminist literature and references to feminists in

²⁸⁷ Jacobson, Max. "Best Bets" *Los Angeles Times*. August 22, 1996: F-2.; Bowers Museum of Cultural Arts in Santa Anna offered an in depth exposure of Frida Kahlo. There were samples of food from Frida's recipes; papier-mâché versions of her work (a series by artist Joaquin Villaseñor); a chance to talk with Genevive Southgate, a Frida impersonator who refers to herself as a Frida "spirit"; also a film about her life was shown. Additionally Hiroko Benko of Santa Barbara, California, makes dolls of

general. Her name is being used alongside that of Virginia Woolf, Eleanor Roosevelt, and Amelia Earhart, all of whom are female icons.

The image of Frida represents the time she lived in and has been remodeled to fit into following generations. In the various representations produced of Frida's image, she is remade as a cultural symbol to stand as a product of the era. Her image is reconstructed for calendars, posters, postcards, playing cards, buttons and pins.²⁸⁸ She has been reborn as an image of mass-mediated popular culture. The image produced is so transparent that it reflects not upon Frida's life but upon the message for which it has been recreated.

During the summer of 1989, reproductions of Frida's painting *Self-portrait as Tehuana* were seen all over London as a means of advertising the exhibit "Art in Latin America." This exhibit consisted of over one-hundred

celebrities, including Frida, that sell from \$350 to \$750. For additional information on the dolls see: <http://www.stormcrow.com/dolls/>

²⁸⁸ New calendars are produced each year. Chronicle Books published a calendar for 1996. Likewise, Frida appears in several books of cards and postcards. For example, Taschen published a book of thirty Frida Kahlo postcards in 1992; Chronicle Books offers a hard cover artbox version with cards and a booklet of pictures and writings. Numerous playing cards include Frida's paintings, such as Artdeck printed in Belgium in 1993. Artist Rhonda Kuhlma has created bottle-cap jewelry. By taking old bottle-caps, placing a picture of a celebrity (including Frida's portraits) on the inside and a pin on the other side, she has created a form of buttons that are sold at "Twist" shops. Artist Susan Gould, along the same line places Frida's portraits in bracelets that are also sold at "Twist." Kitsch boxes with Frida's portraits may also be found at shops that display trendy items to collect. This concept is taken to the extreme with Los Angeles's "Little Frida" café. Author Judd Tully (1994: 126) reports co-owner Rita Boyadjian stating that the café wants to start an '800' number for a Frida Kahlo merchandising company.

Mexican artists, yet Frida's portrait was chosen to represent an image of Mexico.

The following year Frida's self portraits were seen on billboards and posters in New York advertising the exhibit "Mexico: Splendors of Thirty Centuries." In this example Frida's image was asked to take on more than previously. She became the face for Mexico during a time of economic discussions between the United States and Mexico. In San Antonio the alteration of Frida's painting *Self-portrait with Monkeys* led to the indication of Frida as a representation of Mexico itself.²⁸⁹

These paintings have come to mean so much more as the image changes with each intended representation. The icon of Frida's image, is loose and free of containment. The image has flooded the mass-mediated world and become a mediating body of its own. In a sense the image is reflective of the mediatrix, commonly referred to as the Virgin Mary. The mediatrix intercedes between God and man. Frida, in this sense may be understood as a mediatrix whose image is recycled by the mass media. Therefore, it is through the mass media that she appears and mediates between the media and the people. Her image has thus, become more than that of a mere Mexican woman, it has come to represent Mexico as a whole, as an exotic image of its own.

²⁸⁹ Lietz: 76.

This new hybrid image created from the media can live forever as an image of itself. It is the body of the icon. Now Frida, the icon, lives forever as a represented character. She is a sign of power, that conveys culture represented in a woman's body.

CHRONOLOGY

1907 On July 6, Magdalena Carmen Frida Kahlo was born to Matilde Calderon and Guillermo Kahlo in Coyoacan, Mexico City.

1910-1920 Mexican Revolution

1913 Frida contracts polio which impairs her right leg

1922 Enrolls in the Escuela Nacional Preparatoria.

1925 On September 17, Frida was involved in a streetcar accident that changes her life forever.

1928 She becomes member of the Mexican Communist Party.

1929 August 21, married Diego Rivera.

1930 Frida's first pregnancy aborted at three months due to complications.

1930 On November 10, Frida and Diego move to San Francisco where Diego had received a mural commission.

- 1932 Frida and Diego travel to Detroit where Diego had a commission for a mural at the Detroit Institute of Arts.
- 1932 July 4, Frida has a miscarriage.
- 1932 September 15, Frida's mother died.
- 1933 Frida and Diego move to New York for a mural commission.
- 1934 Diego begins an affair with Frida's sister Cristina.
- 1934 Frida has another miscarriage. Her right foot is operated on for the first time and some toes are removed.
- 1935 Her right foot is operated on again, taking six months to recuperate.
- 1936 Frida undergoes surgery, a third operation on her foot.
- 1937 On January 9, Leon Trotsky and his wife Natalia arrive in Mexico.
- 1937 Galeria de Arte (Department of Social Action of the National Autonomous University of Mexico).
- 1938 Julien Levy Gallery, New York: November 1-15; solo exhibit, brochure by Andre Breton.
- 1938 Sells four paintings to American actor Edward G. Robinson.

- 1939 Exhibit at Pierre Colle Gallery “Mexique” Paris: organized by Marcel Duchamp.
- 1939 Frida and Diego file for divorce in September.
- 1940 Frida and Diego remarry on December 8th.
- 1940 Ines Amor’s Gallery of Mexican Art; “International Surrealism Exhibition” Mexico: organized by surrealist writer André Breton, Peruvian writer Cèsar Moro, Austrian painter Wolfgang Paalen, and French artist Alice Rahon.
- 1940 Exhibit at Golden Gate International Exposition, San Francisco
- 1940 Exhibit “Twenty Centuries of Mexican Art,” New York
- 1940 Exhibit at Palace of Fine Arts and National Painting Fair; curated by Kahlo, Mexico.
- 1941 Exhibit at Institute of Contemporary Arts; “Modern Mexican Painter,” Boston.
- 1941 April 14, Frida’s father died.
- 1942 On February 28, she is selected to become a founding member of the Seminario de Cultura Mexicana.

- 1942 Received a teaching position at the Escuela de Pintura y Escultura "La Esmeralda".
- 1942 Exhibit at Museum of Modern Art; "Portraits of the Twentieth Century," New York.
- 1942 Exhibit "First Papers of Surrealism" sponsored by the Council of French Relief Societies.
- 1943 Exhibit at Benjamin Franklin Library; "One Hundred Years of the Mexican Portrait," Mexico.
- 1943 Exhibit "First Salon of the Flower," Mexico: organized by Secretaria de Agricultura y Fomento.
- 1943 Exhibit at Philadelphia Museum of Art; "Mexican Art Today," Philadelphia.
- 1943 Exhibit at Peggy Guggenheim's Art of this Century Gallery; "Women Artists," New York.
- 1943 Exhibit at Palacio de Bellas Artes; "Solon Libre 20 de Noviembre," Mexico.
- 1944 Exhibit at Gallery of Contemporary Painters, Mexico.

- 1944 Exhibit at Segundo Salon de la Flor, Mexico City.
- 1944 "The Child in Art" exhibit sponsored by the Benjamin Franklin Library.
- 1946 Awarded the national prize for painting by the Secretary of Public Education.
- 1946 Frida underwent a bone graft on her spinal column.
- 1947 Exhibit: The Instituto Nacional de Bellas Artes; "Forty-Five Self-Portraits by Mexican Painters," Mexico.
- 1947 Exhibit at Museo Nacional de Artes Plasticas, Palacio de Bellas Artes, Mexico.
- 1948 Exhibit: La Sociedad para el Impulso de las Artes Plasticas, Mexico.
- 1949 Exhibit: Salon de la Plastica Mexicana inauguration exhibit), Mexico.
- 1950 Hospitalized for nine months due to an infection contracted during her bone graft surgery.
- 1953 Exhibit at National Institute of Fine Arts, Mexico City.

- 1953 Exhibit at Lola Alvarez Bravo Gallery, retrospective) Mexico:
first solo exhibit in Mexico.
- 1953 Her right leg is amputated below the knee.
- 1954 She is hospitalized twice. While recovering from
bronchopneumonia she attends a demonstration against United States
intervention in the overthrow of the Guatemalan president.
- 1954 July 13, Frida Kahlo died.
- 1956 Lola Alvarez Bravo Gallery, Mexico: July 13: solo exhibit.
- 1957 November 24, Diego Rivera died.
- 1958 Frida Kahlo Museum opens July 12, Mexico.
- 1966 "The Life and Death of Frida Kahlo" film by Karen and
David Crommie.
- 1968 Olympics XIX, Mexico City; Tlatelco massacre.
- 1970 "Frida Kahlo: Viva la Vida" play by Frederica Schroeder Inclan
at Mexico City's Instituto Nacional de Bellas Artes.
- 1971 "Frida Kahlo" film by Marcela Fernandez-Violante at the
University Nacional Autonoma de Mexico.

- 1973 Exhibit at Museum of Modern Art (retrospective), Mexico City;
August 13, commemorative 20th anniversary of her death;
organized by Fernando Gamboa, museum director: solo exhibit.
- 1977 Palace of Fine Arts (retrospective) Mexico City, Fall: solo exhibit.
- 1977 Sotheby's launched a sale of Latin American art; Frida's work
entered the market in 1979.
- 1978 "Mexico Today Symposium"
- 1978 Exhibit at Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago:
organized by Hayden Herrera: solo exhibit.
- 1978 Exhibit at Galeria de la Raza, "Homage to Frida Kahlo," San
Francisco: November, celebration of the Day of the Dead.
- 1978 Mandeville Art Gallery, UC San Diego; through May 17:
solo exhibit.
- 1978 Phoenix Art Museum, Arizona; June 9-July 23: solo exhibit.
- 1978 University of Texas Art Museum at Austin; August 13- October 1:
solo exhibit.

- 1978 Sarah Campbell Blaffer Gallery, University of Houston; October 14-November 19: solo exhibit.
- 1978 Neuberger Museum, State University of New York at Purchase; December 8-January 4, 1979; solo exhibit.
- 1982 Whitechapel Art Gallery, "Frida Kahlo & Tina Modotti," London; exhibit traveled to Germany and New York.
- 1982 Christie's entered the Latin American art market.
- 1983 Hayden Herrera's *Frida: A Biography of Frida Kahlo* published.
- 1983 Raquel Tibol's *Frida Kahlo: An Open Life* translated and published.
- 1984 National Patrimony Statute (her artwork may not be sold outside Mexico any longer).
- 1984 "Frida: Naturaleza Viva" film by Paul Leduc.
- 1985 Exhibit: "Frida Kahlo, 1907-1954" (April 30-June 15)
Salas Pablo Ruiz Picasso; Paseo de Recoletos 22 Madrid.
Loaned by Ministerie de Cultura Direccion General de Bellas Artes.
- 1986 "Trotsky and Frida: The Musical" play.

- 1987 Exhibit "Art of the Fantastic," Indianapolis Museum of Art.
- 1988 Exhibit "Images of Mexico: The Contribution of Mexico to 20th Century Art," Dallas Museum of Art.
- 1989 PBS Monday night special film on September 4th.
- 1990 Exhibit at Metropolitan Museum; "Mexico: Splendors of Thirty Centuries," New York.
- 1991 "Frida" play by Hilary Bletcher, opened at Plays and Players Theater.
- 1992 "Frida Kahlo: Ribbon Around a Bomb" hour-long documentary film.
- 1992 Louis Newman Gallery; "The Unknown Frida: The Woman Behind the Work": solo exhibit of letters and photographs.
- 1992 "Pasiòn por Frida" Mexican Museum in San Francisco. Exhibit and play.
- 1992 "Women in Mexico" National Academy of Design, New York.
- 1992 Exhibit "Mexico: Splendors of Thirty Centuries," San Antonio Museum of Art.

- 1992 Exhibit at Los Angeles County Museum of Art.
- 1993 Exhibit: "The World of Frida Kahlo" Houston's Museum of Fine Art; August: organized by the Schirn Kunsthalle in Germany and sponsored by Philip Morris Co. Inc.
- 1993 "Frida: Portrait of a Woman" film.
- 1994 Photographic exhibit "Frida and her world," featured 49 black and white photos by Lola Alvarez Bravo; Museo de las Americas. February 3-28. Part of a traveling exhibit that originated from the Instituto Cultural Mexicano of San Antonio.
- 1994 Louis Valediez's film "Frida and Diego" , which never happened.
- 1994 "Trotsky and Frida" play at A Traveling Jewish Theater.
- 1994 "Suite for Frida Kahlo" four part suite, composition by James Newton.
- 1995 Exhibit at Milwaukie Art Museum, "Latin American Women Artists 1915-1995"
- 1995 "Frida Kahlo: Autorretrato del dolor (self-portrait of pain) play by Grupo de Teatro Sinergia performed at William Reigh Las Angeles Photographic Center.

- 1996 Exhibit at Throckmorton Art Gallery, "Frida Kahlo Unmasked,"
New York: solo exhibit of photographs of Frida Kahlo.
- 1996 Exhibit at Modern Museum of Modern Art, San Francisco.
- 1996 Exhibit: "Mexico Pictorial and Folk Art" Dallas, Texas; exhibit also
traveled to Holland, Canada and Spain.
- 1996 "Frida" one person dance by Licia Perea.
- 1996 "Sombra y Sol (Images of Frida Kahlo)" dance produced through
the Jose Limon Dance Company.

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